

Sermons 2011

Pastor Bill Johnson

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Table of Contents

Preface	iv
1. Looking Behind	1
2. Looking Ahead	9
3. Things God Uses	15
4. How Do I Decide?	22
5. Reasons, or Excuses?	28
6. How Do We Decide	36
7. Festus	41
8. How Do We Decide (3)	47
9. Almost Persuaded	52
10. Roots Down - Deepening Relationships With One Another	58
11. Bon Voyage	65
12. Digging Deeper in Worship (1)	70
13. The Final Chapter	75
14. Digging Deeper in Worship - 2	82
15. Digging Deeper in Worship (3)	87
16. Your King is Coming To You	92
17. Why Darkness?	98
18. Questions Outside The Tomb	102
19. Ask Me If I Care	109
20. Please Send Me	115
21. The Pierced Soul	121
22. See The Distress	126
23. Walls Can Be Built	132
24. Enemies All Around	138
25. How To Have Christian Joy	144
26. Stop and Restore	150
27. Digging Deeper Into Baptism	156
28. When It Gets Personal	162
29. Digging Deeper - Bibliology	170
30. Three Things To Remember While I'm Gone	181
31. Digging Deeper - Christology	188
32. Bring the Book	196
33. Digging Deeper - Christology (Part 2)	203
34. Like Never Before	208
35. Digging Deeper - Soteriology	213
36. Digging Deeper - Soteriology (Part Two)	219
37. What The Bible Will Do For You	224
38. Digging Deeper - Pneumatology	231
39. Signed and Sealed	237
40. Building, Battling, and Becoming - To The End	244
41. Oh That Men Would Thank!	251
42. Digging Deeper - Pneumatology (2)	256
43. Digging Deeper - Pneumatology (3)	263
44. Digging Deeper - Eschatology	269
45. Digging Deeper - Beginnings	276
46. In the Fullness of Time, the Fullness of God	282

Preface

These sermons were preached at Friendship Bible Church in Randolph, Ohio. The order in which they appear in this book is the order in which they were delivered.

Chapter 1. Looking Behind

READ - *Genesis 19:14-26*

TOPICAL

THEME - Our challenge at the start of this new year is to learn from the past, but not live in the past; and to keep pressing toward the finish line.

Introduction:

Today is the first Lords Day in 2011. Do you believe it? It is the year 2011! I have now been blessed by God to see over 50 new years. Some of you have seen many more than that.

I always find myself becoming introspective this time of year. I spend time looking back in review... sometimes liking what I see in the rear view mirror, and sometimes not. It is a good and valuable exercise, which I recommend.

This morning, I'd like to consider the topic "looking back", or "looking behind". Toward that end, I picked up my concordance and looked up the word "behind". Several passages emerged, a few of which I will share with you this morning as we look back... or look behind, at 2010, and look forward to 2011.

We should remember the past.

ILLUS - Beth and I visited Massachusetts this past summer. While there we toured the Shaker Village at Hancock, where a community of Shakers lived some years ago. The theme of the attraction seemed to be, "Look at how wonderfully and brilliantly these people lived in the past!" There was a general reverence for, and admiration of, the old ways in which these people had lived.

Certainly, the Bible teaches that we should remember the past. Where appropriate, we should rejoice in our past and revere it. Also, where appropriate, we should learn from it!

We should LOOK BEHIND! We should REMEMBER.

The devil would have you forget God's blessings and leadership, but don't you listen to Him.

The Bible tells us over and over to look behind and remember.

ILLUS - When the Israelites were delivered from bondage, Moses told them to REMEMBER - *And Moses said unto the people, Remember this day, in which ye came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the LORD brought you out from this place.... (Exodus 13:3 KJV)*

At the end of his life, when he was giving his last admonitions to his people before going home to be with the Lord, Moses made REMEMBERING a major theme - it is all through his last book - Deuteronomy:

(KJV) Deuteronomy 5:15 And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day.

(KJV) Deuteronomy 8:2 And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, [and] to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no.

It is repeated over and over in *Deuteronomy* - *And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in Egypt: and thou shalt observe and do these statutes. (16:12)... But thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee thence (24:18)... And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt (24:22)....*

It was a theme in the Psalms:

(KJV) Psalms 77:11 I will remember the works of the LORD: surely I will remember thy wonders of old.

(KJV) Psalms 143:5 I remember the days of old; I meditate on all thy works; I muse on the work of thy hands.

We are told to remember the words of Jesus:

(KJV) Luke 24:6 He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee,

(KJV) John 16:4 But these things have I told you, that when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them. And these things I said not unto you at the beginning, because I was with you.

And we are told to remember the teachings of the apostles:

(KJV) Jude 1:17 But, beloved, remember ye the words which were spoken before of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ;

REMEMBERING, then, is a good thing, commended in the Bible. As we look behind, then, at 2010, let us remember some things.

- Look behind, often, and remember that you were lost, and He saved your rotten soul.

(ESV) Ephesians 2:11-14 Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands-- remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility

(NKJV) Isaiah 38:17 Indeed it was for my own peace That I had great bitterness; But You have lovingly delivered my soul from the pit of corruption, For You have cast all my sins behind Your back.

That verse refers not to what is behind my back, but rather to what is behind God's back... MY SIN! Glory to God! He has put my sin, all of it, past, present, and future, BEHIND HIM! Think of that! Never forget that!

SONG - It Is Well With My Soul

My sin, Oh the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not the part, but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more!
Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, oh my soul.

Satan wants us to look back and see our sin. He is the accuser of the brethren... He points out your past failures, mistakes, slip ups, and sins. But when you look behind, you need not even glance that way, for God has removed them from behind you, and put them behind Him!

(KJV) Hebrews 8:12 For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.

(ESV) Isaiah 43:25 "I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.

Oh brother... sister... as we spend some time on this first Sunday in 2011 looking behind, may we remember that we were lost, and He saved our rotten soul.

- Look behind, often, and see all the times he rescued you from danger.

ILLUS - King David was good at this. I just read the story of David and Goliath in my daily Bible time this past Thursday morning, When challenged as to why he thought an inexperienced youth such as himself could hope to challenge a killer such as Goliath, David replied with a remembrance from his past.

READ - *1 Samuel 17:33-37*

- Look behind, often, and see how He was always there in your past!

(NKJV) Psalms 139:5 You have hedged me behind and before, And laid Your hand upon me.

I wonder how many here today look behind and see times where you truly wondered what was happening in your life... Perhaps despairing at God's seeming absence and indifference to what you were experiencing.... And yet now, you can see He was there all along.

SONG - He Was There All the Time

Time after time I went searching for peace in some void.
I was trying to blame all my ills on this world I was in.
Surface relationships used me 'til I was done in.
And all of the while someone was begging To free me from sin.

Chorus: He was there all the time
He was there all the time
Waiting patiently in line
He was there all the time.

Oh what a wonderful realization that when we look behind, no matter what kind of year we've had, whether good or bad, easy or hard, filled with accomplishment or seeming failure... when we look behind, we see God. He was there all the time... He was ALWAYS there... He has *HEDGED US IN BEHIND AND BEFORE!*

Psalms 139:6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is high, I cannot attain it. (NKJV)

ILLUS - Job led a life of great success and accomplishment. He was rich, influential, and blessed by God in every way. And then a year came along where all that went away. For reasons unknown to him at the time, God allowed him to be tested terribly. He lost his wealth, his health and his family, all in a very small period of time. He suddenly became destitute and destroyed, and sat down on in despair, wondering what had happened. The entire book of Job is about his struggle to comprehend what had happened. But by the time you come to the end of the book, Job has come to remember that even when he could not see Him, God was still there for him. Even when He allowed Job to go through hard times and trying experiences, **GOD WAS STILL THERE FOR HIM.**

Here we stand at the brink of a new year. It is filled with promise and hope. Isn't it exciting to wonder about all God has planned for us in this new year? For our little church? For each of us in our individual walk with Him? How thrilling to stand at the start of something new!

But here, right at the start, it is good to pause for a moment and look behind... and remember... and while we are remembering, LEARN from the things God brought us through. There are lessons to be learned in looking behind and remembering.

ILLUS - I've told you about our Christmas movie tradition in the Johnson home. We have to watch several classics every year, or it just doesn't seem like Christmas. "It's a Wonderful Life," "A Christmas Story," "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer," which is Beth's favorite, and "A Christmas Carol" starring George C. Scott. Don't waste my time with any other version - it must be the George C. Scott version or I am not interested. Best one ever! If you've read Dicken's classic, or watched the movie version, you remember Scrooge at the end of his life. At the end of his dream with the ghost of Christmas yet to come, he is leaning over his own future gravestone. In a beautiful picture of contrition, he sobs out, "I will live in the past, present, and future, all three. I WILL NOT SHUT OUT THE LESSONS THAT THEY TEACH!"

Let us resolve, as we enter this promising new year, to pause for a minute and look behind... let us remember all God has done for us... let us rejoice in it... and let us learn from it... let us not shut out the lessons we see when we look behind!

Do not live in the past.

ILLUS - I mentioned earlier about the Shakers in Massachusetts... how they seemed to revere the past in the Shaker Village at Hancock. But the interesting thing about the Shaker Village in Hancock, is that it is dead! Nobody lives there. Beautiful houses, a wonderful octagonal barn which is one of the architectural wonders of the world, interesting historical perspective on many things, but not a single person.

While remembering the past is a good thing, and it might even be good to rejoice in the past, and certainly the past is a profitable place to learn from, it is not a place to live.

Perhaps you thought this morning as we read from the book of Genesis, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, and its destruction by the Lord, that that was a very strange passage to use as a New Year's message. Perhaps it is, but the words that were spoken there concerning Lot's wife are very instructive to us this morning. Let me draw your attention to those passages one more time.

(NKJV) Genesis 19:17 So it came to pass, when they had brought them outside, that he said, "Escape for your life! Do not look behind you nor stay anywhere in the plain. Escape to the mountains, lest you be destroyed."

(NKJV) Genesis 19:26 But his wife looked back behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.

Did you catch that, in *verse 17*? Do NOT look behind you. "Wait a minute, preacher! I thought the title of today's message was LOOKING BEHIND! I thought you were standing in front of us telling us that we SHOULD spend some time, today, looking behind! And now we read this verse that says, 'DO NOT LOOK BEHIND!' What's the matter with you?"

In *verse 26* we see that Lot's wife looked behind her, in violation of the admonition of the Angels, and was turned into a pillar of salt. Certainly that's one of the more interesting passages in our Bibles, and one of the more interesting stories that we could look at this morning, but the relevant thought for us this morning is that sometimes looking behind is NOT the right thing to do.

Sometimes LOOKING BEHIND, can become LIVING BEHIND. And that's when it becomes dangerous. God wants us to remember the past, rejoice in the past, and learn from the past, but NOT live in the past.

Consider some ways in which people live in the past:

1. We live in the past, when we rest on past accomplishments.

It's way too easy to think that just because we were successful, or accomplished some things for God in the past, that's enough. Our churches are filled with people, who used to serve, but don't anymore, and when asked about it point to a time in the past when they used to serve.

"I used to teach Sunday School, pastor."

"Wonderful, when was that?"

"Oh many years ago... never missed... worked hard at it."

"We need somebody to take over our teen ministry here. Ever think about that?"

"No... I did my part. I used to do that. Tried it... done that... been there... Not going to do it again."

Such a conversation might seem far fetched to you, but it happens all the time! Churches are filled with people resting on their past accomplishments, and doing nothing in the here and now.

2. We live in the past, when that's the only direction in which we look.

ILLUS - It can be dangerous looking behind. I used to drive a bus for Campus Bus Service when I attended KSU. I recall driving my route down Lincoln street one day. A young man was jogging, and he happened to jog by a pretty girl. I almost wrecked the bus as I watched his head swivel around to watch her as he jogged past, and then because he was no longer watching where he was going, he ran dead into a stop sign at the approaching intersection! I can still hear the sound his head made on that steel sign.

Some Christians are too busy looking at where they've been, and not spending enough time thinking about where they are going.

3. We live in the past, when we cannot imagine life any other way.

Perhaps this was the problem with Lot's wife. She was so used to, and so in love with, the life she had had in the past, but she was unwilling to give it up. She was blinded to what God could and would yet do in her life, because she refused to look forward, and was stuck looking backward.

Look behind, Christian, but only briefly. Look behind at all God has done... do it periodically... often even... and learn from the road He has sent you down... BUT DON'T LIVE THERE. Remember Lot's wife!

Press on! Forward! Upward!

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind... (Philippians 3:13-15 NKJV)

Paul here gives us the right perspective. Certainly when he said *forgetting those things which are behind*, he did not mean to indicate that he never learned from, or rejoiced in, or remembered his past. As we have said, those are all good things. Certainly there are examples in Paul's writings of how he did all of those things.

ILLUS - In our studies in *Acts* we have seen Paul look behind at the Damascus Road, where he first met the Savior. He has looked behind and remembered and learned from that past experience.

ILLUS - When Paul met with the Ephesian elders, a meeting we learned about in *Acts 20*. In *vs. 18* he reminded them of how he had lived among them. He looked behind.... He admonished them to do the same:

Acts 20:31 "Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. (NKJV)

But in saying *forgetting those things which are behind*, Paul tells us that he is not willing to live there. The correct response is to rejoice in the past, remember the past, learn from the past, but **PRESS ON TOWARD THE FINISH LINE!**

1. Few things could be more true and more important in the life of the church, than this particular principle.

We have seen great things in the past church let us rejoice and then let us remember them let us learn from them, but let us not live there. Let us move on.

- In 2010, God allowed us to have our first Vacation Bible school in many years, and see two children saved as a result.
- In 2010, God allowed us to expand from 3 Sunday School classes to 6.
- In 2010, God allowed our second Old Fashioned Sunday to be a wonderful day (although some of our dunked deacons may not have thought so!)
- In 2010, God let us field our first softball team in ages, and even win a game along the way!
- In 2010 God gave us 8 souls!
- In 2010, God allowed us to rejoice in 13 baptisms!
- In 2010, God allowed us to welcome 25 new members into our fellowship!
- In 2010, God allowed us to add 4 missionaries to our missionary support.
- In 2010, God allowed our average Sunday morning attendance to increase by over 150%.
- In 2010, God allowed our giving to exceed expectations by almost 200%.

It's great to look behind and see these things, but church, we must not live there. Do you think we have done enough? Do you think God is done with those tiny accomplishments? Do you think we can now look back and rest and take our ease?

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind.... (Philippians 3:13-15 NKJV)

I am haunted, often, by one particular verse of scripture which the Holy Spirit seems to bring to my mind. *Romans 13:11 And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. (NKJV)*

The time left to us is shorter today than it was yesterday. Consider that verse in the NLT - *Romans 13:11 Another reason for right living is that you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for the coming of our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. (NLT)*

Paul was speaking there of the return of Christ... the second coming... and it is closer now, in 2011, than it was in 2010! Therefore, we must run harder the closer we get to the finish line. Paul's metaphor in this passage is a runner, running a race, and straining toward the goal as he gets closer and closer to the finish line.

ILLUS - And you've all seen what he's talking about, when the Olympics air once every 4 years. We see the track and field athletes tearing around the track, and they seem to be giving it their all, until suddenly just as they approach the finish line they seem to give it a bit more. They strain toward that tape, thrusting their chests forward with all their might, trying to be first across that line.

It's closer now, than it was yesterday. Time is shorter now than it was then. Church, our challenge in 2011 is to run harder, faster, and strain toward the finish line! Let us do more in 2011 than in 2010. Let us learn from the past, but not live in it... not get stuck in it. Ever upward! Ever forward! Ever toward the finish line for Jesus!

2. Just as it is important in the life of the church. The same principle is vital to the health and welfare in life of the individual believer.

Do you feel you grew in your walk with Christ in 2010? Praise God! But don't rest on that.... you're not at the finish line yet. Keep running. Ever upward. Ever forward.

Did you take the challenge at the beginning of 2010 and start reading your Bible every day? Glory to God! But don't quit now! Keep reading. Keep growing. Ever forward. Ever upward.

Did you try some new levels of involvement in this little church in 2010? Maybe you gave midweek prayer meeting a try... or maybe it was one of the new adult Sunday School offerings... or maybe you, for the first time in your life, helped in VBS... or maybe you were one of the growing number of people who gave a Saturday morning to serving at the Haven of Rest... or maybe you gave a Saturday or two to trying to share your faith at the Randolph Farmers Market... or maybe you joined your brothers for a Saturday morning prayer breakfast - something you had never tried before. WONDERFUL! But don't quit now! Keep moving forward. Try more things this year. Read more, learn more, study more, pray more, grow more!

Conclusion:

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind.... (Philippians 3:13-15 NKJV)

We are closer to it now, at the beginning of 2011, than we were yesterday, in 2010. But brother... sister... friend - you and I are not at the finish line yet!

For some of you, the race was hard in 2010. For some of you, 2011 has started with you flat on your back and looking up. Some of you have faced, or are facing terrible trials even now. Some of you may feel like Christian in Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, who was going on his journey toward heaven when he was attacked by our great enemy, Apollyon. "Apollyon made at him, throwing darts as thick as hail; by the which, notwithstanding all that Christian could do to avoid it, Apollyon wounded him..."

He was wounded, but not defeated. His race was not yet run, and he got up and went on.

We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed-- (2 Corinthians 4:8-9 NKJV)

ILLUS - You know I like music. The fact is I like all kinds of music. My tastes are quite eclectic. Were you to spend a few minutes looking at what's on my iPod, you would agree. One form of music I love is Broadway musicals. And perhaps my favorite of all I've heard is "Les Miserable", which I think is absolutely wonderful, both from the perspective of the music, and the story it tells. The hero, Jean Valjean, is hounded throughout his life by Javert, who wants to capture him and throw him in jail for a sin many

years in his past. (Much as Satan wants to capture you and imprison you and keep you from a life of serving God.) At one point in the story, Javert and Valjean face off. Refusing to fall to Javert, Valjean utters some of the most inspiring words ever written. He draws himself up, faces Javert, and says, "I am warning you, Javert. I'm a stronger man by far. There is power in me yet. MY RACE IS NOT YET RUN."

Neither is mine.

Neither is yours.

Let us remember the past, but not live in it. Let us *press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus....*

That is our challenge for 2011.

Chapter 2. Looking Ahead

READ - *Isaiah 37:1-38*

TEXT - (NKJV) *Isaiah 37:31 And the remnant who have escaped of the house of Judah Shall again take root downward, And bear fruit upward.*

THEME - If we would build UP, we must first build DOWN.

Introduction:

May I have every head bowed please, and every eye closed? I'd like to start today's message with a few questions, and I want you to consider them in the quietness of your own heart. Just you and God, alone. Here are the questions:

1. How much do I know my God? Do I know Him more today than I did a year ago?

"Preacher, how can I possibly answer that? How can I gauge my level of knowledge of God or my closeness to Him?"

"Well, perhaps a couple more questions might help."

2. Do you spend more time with your Bible now than you did a year ago? In other words, has your interest in what He has to say to you grown over the year?
3. Do you pray more now than you did a year ago? Or, put another way, has your interest in talking with Him grown over the past year?
4. How is your behavior... your walk with God? Are you gaining victory over any of the old sins that so easily beset you a year ago, or are you still struggling with the same old things? Does your lifestyle look any different to the outside world than theirs? Can they tell you are a Christian? Is it MORE obvious now than it was a year ago?

In other words, do you care more about aligning your life with God's standard MORE today, than you did a year ago? Is it MORE important to you today that your lifestyle glorify the Lord... more important to you today that people who look at how you live and what you do are attracted to Jesus... than it was a year ago?

Certainly we all want to be moving forward for Jesus, don't we? I'm guessing you are no different.

Now I realize we haven't even started the sermon yet, and you aren't yet fully aware of my topic, but let me ask you one final question. While our heads are bowed, how many would be willing to say with an uplifted hand, "Pastor, I am interested in digging deeper and going further for God in 2011 than I did in 2010? If there is a way God can help me accomplish more for Him, I want to know about it." Who will say yes to that, right before I pray this morning?

PRAY

Amen! I wish to speak to you this morning on the topic, "Looking Ahead." Last week, we spent some time on the opposite thought - "Looking Behind." I'd like to put the other bookend to that thought today.

Now I know some are wondering, "What happened to *Acts* ? It's been a while since we went there, and we are not yet done with our series entitled "Power and Witness." We left Paul in chains and defending himself before the Sanhedrin... but... we left him. When are we ever going back there?" Well, soon. Christmas and

the New Year have intruded into that study, but Lord willing, today is the last distraction from it, and we will be back on track next Lord's Day.

But I do want to finish my thought from last week. We spent some time looking behind - reviewing the past year. It's good, isn't it, to remember where we've been and what we've come through - not only as a church, but as an individual Christian. I love the way Gloria Gaither put it in the song we sang last week:

SONG -

If you could see what I once was
If you could go with me
Back to where I started from
Then I know you would see
A miracle of love that took me in its sweet embrace
And made me what I am today
Just an old sinner saved by grace.

But even though looking behind is profitable and good, we closed out last week's sermon with the reminder that we need to turn our eyes to the future... look ahead... *forgetting those things which are behind...* . It is that theme I would have us build upon today. For our salvation was only the beginning! The starting place! It only goes on from there!

I am convinced some think that when they trust Christ, they've done all that needs to be done. They think that they have eternal life (which they do), and so there is nothing else to think about. They know that their sins are forgiven (which is true), and so they don't concern themselves with any further changes to their lifestyle. In short, some Christians come to the starting gate of Christianity, hear the starter's pistol go off, take the first step by calling upon the name of the Lord, are saved, and then go no further.

SONG (Dallas Holm) -

Hey I'm a Believer Now! Since Jesus changed my mind.
Hey I'm a believer now! And everything's gonna be fine!

Yep - you may be a believer now. All is well with your soul. You are eternally secure... born again... on your way to the paradise of heaven... a child of the King and part of the family of God. Glory! Everything IS fine.

But now what? That was then? That's looking behind. But what of looking ahead? What lies there? And if we are the kind of Christian that is unsatisfied with living a changeless and improvement-less race for Jesus, how can we do better? Those questions we asked a minute ago... how CAN we be the kind of Christians who answer YES to all of them. "Yes, pastor, I am closer to God today than a year ago. Yes... I AM more in love with my Bible now than then, and yes, I DO spend more time praying than I did... YES, I AM finding it easier to live an openly Christian life before the world than I did a year ago. YES!"

Well, that brings me to a verse that I believe God wants us to consider as our theme verse, if you will, for 2011. I have been praying about where He would have us go this year, and what our emphases should be for the year.

Note

(A little review might be in order here. Been here 4 years now - January 1 marked start of year 5 with you. First year - just settling in, "getting to know you" as the song says. Second year - turned the church on its head with renaming and reorganizing. Third year - God let us emphasize missions - the "uttermost parts of the earth" parts of our commission. Fourth year - last year - that emphasis seemed to be more on our local community - our "Jerusalem" - as we saw lots of local growth.)

I think it would be fair to say that for the last two years, at least, our major emphasis has been on OUTreach. And it has resulted in taking on more missionaries - expanding the reach of FBC around the world. I don't know about you, but I can't wait to get to heaven and see what my missionary giving has resulted in! We witness and witness here in America, and see very little apparent result. We give invitation after invitation with not a single apparent decision here in this country. But in other areas of the world, where we support missionaries, the church is literally EXPLODING with growth. And you and I who put our mission dollars in the plate share in that fruit. And when we get to heaven we're gonna see those results. I can't wait!

OUTreach - that emphasis has also resulted in growth here. Some of you weren't here a year ago. Some of you weren't here 3 months ago. We may not have been particularly effective with our efforts at the Farmer's Market this year, or at knocking on doors in Randolph, or at any of our other efforts to reach out into our Jerusalem, but God sure seems to have blessed our ATTEMPT anyway. For He has surely been building His church, in spite of our messing it up at every turn. And now, we have a whole different look than a year ago. Our family has expanded... we have a whole new set of needs and opportunities.

Well - our theme verse for the year is, I believe, (NKJV) *Isaiah 37:31 And the remnant who have escaped of the house of Judah Shall again take root downward, And bear fruit upward..* I read that verse a while back, and the Lord seemed to indicate to me that it describes the direction we need to go in 2011 - not OUTreach... but INreach.

Of course, I know that this verse has a specific meaning and interpretation. Judah was under the threat of Syria. We can see the context of the verse if we back up to *Isaiah 36:1-2*. Assyrian had them under siege. And the Assyrian leaders were taunting Israel's God, saying that no other god had delivered any other people from the Assyrians' destruction, and the God of Israel would be just as powerless. In our Scripture, this morning, we read of Hezekiah's response to these threatening and insulting words - he prayed about it. And we read also about God's response - He answered Hezekiah's prayer, and mightily defeated the Assyrian efforts, and sent them packing. He then gave a wonderful promise in *Isaiah 37:31* - a promise that was specific to the Israelites there in that day - you will NOT be destroyed and removed from this land. There WILL be a remnant who will remain, who will be planted in this land, and who will grow and bear fruit. (If we consider how the verse was translated by the NLT, we can see that meaning very clearly conveyed - *Isaiah 37:31 And you who are left in Judah, who have escaped the ravages of the siege, will take root again in your own soil, and you will flourish and multiply. (NLT)*)

But in addition to the national promise God gave there to Hezekiah and Israel, there is a principal for you and I in 2011. *Take root downward, and bear fruit upward.* ROOTS DOWN, and FRUIT UP! Another way me might say it is - If we would build UP, we must first build DOWN.

We don't want to stop reaching out in 2011. But we DO want to add an emphasis on making what we have work. Because I believe when we build DOWN, God will enable us to further build UP. When we *put roots downward, we will bear even more fruit upward.*

Now I have a bunch of ideas of how that will look in our church. In the coming months you're going to see a variety of changes to our preaching teaching plan - all designed to inject an emphasis on not only reaching the lost, but building the saved - on equipping us all to dig deeper. I believe that when we each take root downward, getting deeper into the Word, and becoming more and more rooted and grounded in our Lord, we will see all kinds of positive results.

Obviously, the benefits to this church will be great, for if the principal of ROOTS DOWN, FRUIT UP is true, then we will see more fruit. That means more will be saved and our family will increase and our community will be helped and reached. All good!

But in the few minutes remaining this morning, let me challenge you personally concerning the benefits to you - Mr. or Mrs. Christian. I want to mention just a few of the benefits of digging deeper in your walk with God. Just a few benefits you will experience if you resolve to *take root downward* :

Taking root downward brings SECURITY.

ILLUS - We have seen what happens to even the most magnificent tree when it's roots don't go deep. We have probably all experienced the aftermath of storms where once beautiful and towering and majestic trees lie pitifully across yards and highways, their too-shallow root balls exposed and insufficient. And if you are like me, you no doubt looked from the sad spectacle of that dying giant to another tree that stood near it, and still stands, having weathered the storm. Why did the one stand when the other fell? Of course the answer is, the one's roots went deep! Taking root downward brought SECURITY.

Christian, you need not be insecure in your faith! We talk often about eternal security - how once a person is saved, they are always saved. My Bible says:

(NKJV) 2 Corinthians 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

(NKJV) John 5:24 "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.

We believe it and rejoice in it - we are saved saved saved! And nobody can take it away.

But then why are so many Christians worried... nervous... afraid? Why do so many Christians fret over the future? Why, when world events come into the conversation, does FEAR enter into the minds and hearts of so many believers?

Such might be true for some of you. Do you fear the future? When the imminent collapse of the world economy is prognosticated on your favorite news channel, does it make you afraid? When the news of Iranian nuclear arsenals... Mexican drug wars threatening our southern borders... or the internal threats from our own corrupt government, plays across your TV screen - does it make you afraid?

I submit that the deeper you put down roots, the less you will be afraid of anything - the more SECURE you will be!

(NKJV) Psalms 56:4 In God (I will praise His word), In God I have put my trust; I will not fear. What can flesh do to me?

(NKJV) Psalms 118:6 The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?

(NKJV) Hebrews 13:5-6 Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we may boldly say: "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"

When your roots go deep, you can stand fearlessly, no matter what circumstances come into your life:

(NKJV) 2 Timothy 1:12 For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day.

READ - *Romans 8:35-39*

That kind of security in your faith will come when you put down ROOTS. ROOTS DOWN!

Taking root downward brings SUPPORT.

ILLUS - This past summer, my brother called me from southern Ohio to tell me that his woods, where he and I and Josh like to hunt, had been demolished in a freak windstorm. Leveled. He described one section of his property where we had often hung our stands in thick beautiful trees as "a field" - nothing left. I was

therefore anxious this fall to get down there and see it. He had not exaggerated. One of the things I noticed - a lot of those trees were of the type we have previously described - no roots - no support, and when the wind hit them, they just went right down. But they had stood for years because they were protected from the wind by strong trees around them - trees that DID have deep roots.

Some of our number are babes in Christ. If God continues to bless and build His church here, we will always have some who are babes... some who are newborn Christians... some who need the shelter and protection and SUPPORT of others as they grow.

The more of us who *take root downward*, the more support our little church can provide for the weaker and younger among us. Here is a challenge to the older and more mature Christians - DIG DEEPER. Your younger brothers and sisters need you.

All of us react with sadness when a preacher falls from grace and brings shame and dishonor on our Lord. And often, young weak Christians topple when that happens. We probably all know some believer who was wounded by such an experience. But while the preacher falling may get headlines, the damage is just as severe when the unknown Christian who, unbeknownst to him or her, was a mentor and an example to other young Christians, falls.

Listen to me, older and mature Christian - your example has consequences. People follow or fall based on what they see in you. You fall, and often they will fall with you! You stand, and so too might they! DIG DEEPER, Christian, so you can support the saplings God plants around us. ROOTS DOWN!

(NKJV) Acts 20:35 "I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

(NKJV) Galatians 6:2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Romans 15:1 Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. (NASB)

Taking root downward brings SUSTENANCE.

ILLUS - A few years ago my wife and I awoke to complete mayhem. During the night a young man had gotten intoxicated, jumped into his pickup truck, tore off down our road, taken a detour across my front lawn, and demolished a nice maple tree I had there. Amazingly, Beth and I slept through the police and tow truck that came. We heard later from all of our neighbors how they had been there, in our yard watching the scene with interest. None knocked on our door though and we slept through the whole thing! It was the tree that I want you to think about. The impact from the truck had completely removed the bark all the way around from the ground up about two feet. Not one sliver of bark remained on that tree. Now you no doubt learned in high school science that a tree cannot live like that. The bark (more specifically the layer between the wood and the bark called the cambium layer) is what transfers water and nutrients from the roots to the rest of the tree. It is the supply line, and on that particular tree, it was cut off completely. I looked at that tree, which was a particularly beautiful Maple tree. It was one of those that turns bright red in the fall. It was all leafed out and looked so beautiful, even after it had been hit. It looked completely alive.... but I knew I was looking at a dead tree. It struggled on for the rest of that year, but if you come to my house today, that tree is no longer there. When that drunk driver cut off the roots, the tree died.

Our church will only live and keep growing if we send our roots deep.

You, Christian, need the nourishment that comes from sinking your roots deep into God's word, and deep into your faith. ROOTS DOWN, or you will eventually fade away.

ILLUS - John Piper, in a recent sermon, pointed out that God speaks to him everyday. He emphasized the word "everyday" several times. John is not a charismatic and was not referring to visions or dreams

or any other such thing, but rather to the fact that as he reads his Bible day in and day out, God speaks to him through that Word.

And when you dig deep... when you put ROOTS DOWN into God's Word, God will feed you in like manner. That's why we do things every January like the 61 Day Challenge. It's not just something to do. It's not just a religious exercise meant to fill up your time. IT WILL HELP YOU, CHRISTIAN. THE DEEPER YOU GET INTO GOD'S WORD, THE MORE SUSTAINED YOU WILL BE. IT WILL NOURISH YOU AND FEED YOU!

(NKJV) 1 Peter 2:2 as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby.

(NKJV) Job 23:12 I have not departed from the commandment of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth More than my necessary food.

Conclusion:

And the remnant who have escaped of the house of Judah Shall again take root downward, And bear fruit upward. (Isaiah 37:31 NKJV)

ROOTS DOWN, FRUIT UP - that is our emphasis as we look ahead into 2011. The way to EXTERNAL BLESSINGS starts with INTERNAL DEVELOPMENT. If we would build UP, we must first build DOWN. In order to have more and more OUTreach, we need to concentrate on INreach!

We'll talk about it more in the days ahead, but my challenge to you this morning is to make it an emphasis in your personal walk, as we make it an emphasis in our church programming this year.

Are you up to that challenge? Will you commit to it?

ROOTS DOWN, FRUIT UP!

Chapter 3. Things God Uses

READ - Acts 23:11-35

TEXT - (NKJV) Acts 23:16 *So when Paul's sister's son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul.*

THEME - God delivered Paul, and He used both things natural and supernatural to do it.

Introduction:

The Scripture tells the story of Paul's deliverance from a plot against his life, and his deliverance to Felix the governor in Caesarea.

It is an exciting story, and I can imagine the tension that must have surrounded every minute of it, as in the middle of the night Paul is rushed off, under the protection of an army to Caesarea.

I wonder if you are like me. When you read your Bible, do you try to imagine what it looked like? Do you try and put yourself in the scene, and visual it? In your mind's eye, can you see the whispered conversation between Paul's nephew and the commander (*vss. 19-21*)? Can you imagine the commander then calling for two of his trusted centurions (*vs. 23*) (a centurion oversaw 100 men)? Can you hear his urgent command to muster their troops and take Paul to Caesarea? Can you imagine the centurions rousting their men, and can you see in your mind's eye the soldiers donning armor, and weaponry? Do you see the glint of 200 spears flashing in the sun, the creaking of leather and the chink of steel armor? Do you hear the clacking hooves of 70 horses, and the steady beat of 400 soldiers marching? Can you imagine the scene as 470 men, 70 on horses, and 400 on foot, leave the city under cover of darkness, surrounding this one man, Paul, whom they are now tasked with protecting. Can you see it?

And can you imagine the dismay of the 40+ enemies of God who had bound themselves with an oath that they would kill Paul? Can you see them watching from along the way, as 470 Roman killers marched by them... can you sense how powerless they must have felt at the sight of their hated enemy Paul, riding away in the darkness, away from them, and safe from their evil plans. Can you smell it? Can you feel it? Can you hear it? Can you see it?

Well, God did something great here, no doubt. He mightily delivered Paul from danger. But this morning I want us to ask ourselves, "What did He use to deliver Paul?" And as we consider the question, we may be somewhat surprised by the answer. For, in delivering Paul, God used things like:

1. Ordinary People
2. Paul's Reputation
3. Limitless Power

Think about it. God used:

Ordinary People

It is a pretty amazing story. And it would be easy for us to think of the deliverance as having come from the Roman soldiers, wouldn't it? After all, they were the ones bristling with armor and weaponry and guiding him to safety. Or we might consider that the Roman commander was responsible. After all, he gave the order and organized the whole thing. Obviously, we know the deliverance was the work of God, but He used these means, didn't He? He used the 200 soldiers... the 200 spearmen... and the 70 horsemen, right? He used the Roman commander and the 2 centurions, right?

Right.

But He also used a young man who just happened to overhear a conversation... a young man who is nameless and of seemingly no importance anywhere else in scripture. We know nothing of him, other than he was here... he heard something... and he told Paul about it.

(NKJV) Acts 23:16 So when Paul's sister's son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul.

Perhaps the greatest miracle of all in this story, is that our God could so superintend from the beginning of time that this young man was right where he needed to be to hear a conversation that would lead to the deliverance of Paul - just as God planned.

Think about it:

1. Sometimes God DOES deliver in miraculous ways.

ILLUS - He delivered Daniel from the lions' den - that was pretty miraculous. You can read about that in *Daniel 6:1-24*. Daniel knew his deliverance was a miracle, and explained it like this - *Daniel 6:22 "My God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths, so that they have not hurt me, because I was found innocent before Him; and also, O king, I have done no wrong before you." (NKJV)*

ILLUS - He delivered the 3 Hebrews from the burning fiery furnace - pretty miraculous. You can read that so try in *Daniel 3:1-25*. Or just hear the description of how God delivered them, miraculously - *Daniel 3:24-25 (NKJV) Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished; and he rose in haste and spoke, saying to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "True, O king." "Look!" he answered, "I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God."*

ILLUS - When the Israelites found themselves pinned against the Red Sea by a seemingly invincible army of Egyptians, God miraculously parted the water and led them to safety, and then used the same pathway that had saved the Israelites to destroy the entire Egyptian army. Moses explanation of that deliverance is wonderful - *Exodus 14:13-14 (KJV) And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will shew to you to day: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever. The LORD shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace.*

ILLUS - Earlier in our study in *Acts* we learned of how God sent an angel and busted Peter out of prison. cf. *Acts 12:7*

Clearly, God DOES sometimes deliver in miraculous ways. Don't let anybody tell you differently - our God is a miracle working God, and He is no different today than He was in those instances.

Isaiah 59:1 Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, That it cannot save; Nor His ear heavy, That it cannot hear. (NKJV)

Hebrews 13:8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. (NKJV)

QUOTE (Dayan??) - The God that was, is. The God that did, does!

Yes, sometimes God does deliver in miraculous ways, BUT:

2. Sometimes God delivers in seemingly mundane ways.

- Don't miss God's small deliverances.

ILLUS - One of the pastors at Emmanuel Baptist Church when I attended there was named Jim Callen. He taught an adult Sunday School class which Beth and I attended. He came into class one Lord's Day with a story to tell. He had been in a hurry... rushing to make it on time. It had seemed like the devil was turning every stop light red, and he was delayed at every turn. He was becoming angry and increasingly impatient. He sat at a stop light revving his engine and the second it turned green he floored it, so upset was he over the delays. But rather than roar through the intersection his car stalled right where it sat. But before he could scream in frustration, he watched in awe as the car that had been in the lane beside him pulled into the intersection, and was crushed by a car that did not stop for the light. Humbly, Jim gave a word of testimony and thanks for God's deliverance.

I often think about Brother Jim Callen when I find myself delayed by traffic lights, or some other inconvenience. Is God delivering me, or protecting me, from something? Does our great God sometimes use things as mundane as traffic lights, or stalled engines, to deliver us? To protect us?

In Paul's case, the small deliverance came from a simple overheard conversation by a simple and ordinary young man.

Need help? Looking for deliverance? Praying for a miracle from God? He might just send you one, but He might just as well use something simple... something seemingly mundane, to answer your prayer. He might just use an ordinary person! Don't miss God's small deliverances.

- Don't miss the opportunity to BE the ordinary person God uses.

It's amazing how important every single member of this church is to the work of God. You might think you are insignificant, or that you are not very gifted. But you would be very very very wrong.

Your simplest words might be used mightily in somebody's life.

ILLUS - One of our younger believers walked up to me recently and told me he was reading a new book - "The Reason for God," by Timothy Keller. I wanted to shout! He had no idea how such a simple little statement would encourage his pastor, but it did! Nothing makes me want to shout more than seeing young Christians growing in the Lord!

(Of course, the opposite is true, too. Words spoken wrongly... unkind words... evil words... gossip... can do just as much damage as Godly words can do good.)

Your spiritual gift, no matter what it is, exercised faithfully in your local church, can be used of God in miraculous and powerful ways! You do remember that you have a spiritual gift, right? Given to you by God for the benefit of others in your local church? You remember that, right?

1 Corinthians 12:7 But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: (NKJV)
- I love the way the NLT puts that verse - *A spiritual gift is given to each of us as a means of helping the entire church. (NLT)*

ILLUS - I had a sister send me a card recently - just a postcard, which said she was going to be praying for me all this year - her resolution. Talk about the spiritual gift of encouragement! That simple act was a source of great encouragement to me. It FIRED ME UP!

(Of course the opposite is true here, too. NOT using the gift God has entrusted to you for that very purpose can lead to negative consequences.)

ILLUS - Every time somebody in this church uses their spiritual gift, no matter how small it might seem, I am uplifted, and so are others.

Don't miss the opportunity to BE the small thing God uses.

(NKJV) Acts 23:16 So when Paul's sister's son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul.

God used ordinary people!

Paul's Testimony.

READ - *Acts 23:17-19*

It's interesting, isn't it, that these Roman soldiers, who dealt with prisoners all day long, would care one bit about Paul. What was special about Paul that would make them want to listen and want to protect him? Why wouldn't they have just thought, good riddance, and looked the other way as his enemies sought to destroy him?

Well, one obvious reason might be self-preservation - cf. vs. 27. Compare to *Acts 22:25-29* .

I suggest it goes deeper, though. I suggest that Paul had impressed, and won them over, just as he seemed to do everywhere he went. Oh, the religious establishment hated him, to be sure. But I don't see that same reaction from the non-religious lost world, because Paul took pains to not needlessly offend people he wanted to see won to Christ.

(NKJV) 1 Corinthians 9:19-22 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

(NKJV) 1 Corinthians 10:31-33 Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved.

Many Christians would do well to learn from Paul here!

Now, let's be clear that the cross, itself, does cause offense.

(NKJV) Galatians 5:11 And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why do I still suffer persecution? Then the offense of the cross has ceased.).

We cannot and must not minimize that. We must stand and proclaim without apology that Jesus' death on the cross was the only solution to the need of men's souls, and that Jesus is the only way to heaven. That offends some. We can't help that. That offense is necessary and Paul certainly never shied away from it.

But, there is NO PLACE for needless offensiveness in any believer!

ILLUS - Consider two names - Billy Graham, and Fred Phelps. Billy Graham has lived a life of testimony for Jesus. He is an unashamed preacher of the gospel, and has never shied away from the offense of the cross, teaching millions that Jesus is the only way to heaven. And yet in polls he is consistently rated one of the most respected and admired men in the world. Fred Phelps on the other hand, is rightly despised and a source of disgust to both the lost world and Christians everywhere, because of his extreme attempts to offend everybody and everything. (Fred Phelps is the "pastor" of Westboro Baptist Church, in Topeka, Kansas, a "church" that shames all Christians everywhere. This is the "church" (it's neither baptist nor a church) that has as one of its central messages "God hates fags." This is the "church" that pickets at the funerals of our fallen soldiers and burns our American flag! Fred Phelps and his "church" are a disgrace to our Lord. I pray God would remove it from the face of this earth!) If Billy Graham had been in Paul's

place that day, I believe the Roman commander may have behaved just as he did with Paul. If Fred Phelps had been there, I think the commander would have handed the key to his enemies.

Oh, Christian - guard your testimony before the lost world. Do not be guilty of offending others needlessly. Live in such a way that the lost world thinks well of you, not poorly.

(NKJV) Matthew 5:16 "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

Paul's God used Paul's testimony, because he hadn't screwed it up! For all their questions about what Paul believed, the lost world looked at him with respect. Is that true of you and me? Is it true of FBC?

His Matchless Power!

(NKJV) Acts 23:13 Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy.

More than 40 men! That is a formidable group to have arrayed against you. More than 40 men who were organized, determined, and powerful! More than 40 men who were seemingly destined to succeed in killing Paul.... Yet, in spite of their numbers, they failed... they either broke their oath in frustration, or if they kept their oath, starved to death!

So many have set themselves against God and His people. Useless. Laughable. (Psalmist even said God laughs at them! - *(NKJV) Psalms 2:1-4 WHY do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, "Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us." He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; The LORD shall hold them in derision.*)

Job 5:13 He catches the wise in their own craftiness, and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end. (ESV)

(NKJV) Proverbs 21:30 There is no wisdom or understanding Or counsel against the LORD...

ILLUS - Elisha and Gehazi - *(NKJV) 2 Kings 6:16 So he answered, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."*

ILLUS - Goliath with all his superiority of size and power, set himself up against little David, and lost.

Greater is He that is in you, than He that is in the world. (1 John 4:4)

ILLUS - In *Revelation 19:21* , we learn that the Antichrist and all his forces - basically the WHOLE LOST WORLD will set themselves against our Lord in the final battle, and He will destroy them - ALL OF THEM - with a word.

Lamentations 3:37 Who is he who speaks and it comes to pass, When the Lord has not commanded it? (NKJV)

ILLUS - The lords of the Philistines laughed at seemingly beaten Samson, thinking they had finally won out against him and His God, but even in their seeming victory, they lost! Blind, imprisoned, chained, mocked, ridiculed, and completely humbled, He nonetheless had GOD. The Philistines were outnumbered, and lost.

SONG - Our God is an awesome God, HE REIGNS in heaven above, with wisdom POWER and love, Our God is an awesome God!

Paul's God was NEVER OUTNUMBERED! And neither is ours!

There was no problem too big for Paul's God. Nor for ours!

Conclusion:

Paul needed something from God. He needed deliverance from enemies who sought to destroy him. And so God delivered him.

In doing so, God used ordinary people. He used Paul's own good testimony. And He used the infinite power that no man, no king, no army, could stand against.

Oh what a mighty God we serve!

Invitation:

We thank you Father, that you can deliver your children from your enemies. Thank you for this story from Paul's life that reminds us of that truth.

Thank you that you used an ordinary young man to affect that deliverance. May we not miss your hand in our lives, even when it's disguised by the ordinary. And may we not neglect to be the ordinary Christians that you so powerfully use in the lives of others.

Thank you, God, for the reminder of how important our testimony is. Forgive us when we tarnish it. Forgive us when we fail to protect it. Forgive us and help us to keep our testimony before this lost world.

And most of all, Father, thank you for your limitless power... your omnipotence, which can deliver and protect us from any, even our adversary who sometimes threatens so terribly.

Now Lord, there is a group of people here today who have heard these things, and now I ask you would help them to act upon them.

Some may not yet know You. They may need to give their life to Christ today. Would you help them do that?

Some may need to pray about some things. They may need to rededicate their life to you - they may need to rededicate their spiritual gift(s) to you. They may need to confess that they have kept that gift wrapped up in a napkin when they should have been using it for your glory... for the benefit of others who might have been helped by it.

Your people are here... I have tried to preach this message as best as I could, Father. I pray that the Holy Spirit would use it now... break down resistance now... and encourage decisions and changes in the lives of your people. Do it now, Lord.

EVERY HEAD BOWED, PLEASE

Do you know this God, who could so deliver Paul? If you could talk with Paul this morning, he would tell you that his greatest deliverance wasn't this one. He would say his greatest deliverance happened on the road to Damascus, when he met His Savior... when He gave his life to Jesus. Have you had such a deliverance? If not, Jesus stands ready to receive you today, if you will just come to him. He forces Himself upon nobody, but offers Himself to everybody. Do you need to turn to Christ today? Will you let me pray for you today? (HANDS)

Has God spoken to your heart about something through His Word today? How many would say yes, to that? (HANDS)

This part of our service is underutilized by this church. Someone mentioned in the survey that we need to prolong the invitations, to give the Holy Spirit time to work. Perhaps. But don't count on that... don't sit there thinking, I'll move if he sings just one more verse.... If God is convicting you about something,

you need to move, on that first verse, and talk with him about it here. I, or another brother or sister will gladly pray with you if you desire. Come - don't wait.

SING

Chapter 4. How Do I Decide?

READ - *1 Corinthians 6*

TEXT - (NKJV) *1 Corinthians 6:12 All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.*

THEME - Our freedom in Christ is limited to what is good, safe, and honoring to God.

introduction:

A couple weeks ago, we mentioned our theme for 2011 - ROOTS DOWN, FRUIT UP. Based on *Isaiah 37:31*, that theme is meant to focus our attention for the year on digging deeper in our relationship with God, and digging deeper in our relationships with our church family. Several things are happening to foster that goal. Our method of teaching on Sunday mornings are one of those "happenings." While not abandoning our verse by verse studies, we are going to augment them with some topical studies, which may be timely and needed in our church. As God leads, we will alternate between Sundays - one week in our current verse by verse study (Acts), and the following week in a topical study.

Today, then, I want to begin a short topical study entitled "How Do I Decide?" This topic comes in response to a question that came up in one of our recent Eldership Exploration meetings.

The question was (and I paraphrase) - "How do you decide upon a right course of action when the Bible is silent on the subject? Or how do you decide when there may be some mention in Scripture, but it is unclear?"

Good question. One which we all need to be able to answer. So, for a couple weeks, let's consider - How Do I Decide?

Now, the first and foremost consideration is, is it decided for us clearly on scripture? If so, the argument is concluded. Most of the time, we need go no further. "What does the Bible say?" is the first principal.

(NKJV) *Psalms 119:9 How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word.*

(NKJV) *Psalms 119:105 Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path.*

But what of things that aren't so clear? Or things that weren't even around when the Bible was written?

Some people take the "list of dos and don'ts" approach. Some of you have experience with that.

ILLUS I don't drink or chew or run with girls who do!

ILLUS My training was at a strict Baptist Bible college. You could not drink, smoke, gamble, or even go to movies and attend that school. The first three on that list didn't bother me a bit, as I never fell pray to any of those temptations, but I did love movies! TELL ABOUT STAR TREK.

Is it wrong for a Christian to drink? Smoke? Gamble? Watch movies?

We can certainly cite chapter and verse about some of those things, but not all of them. And in some cases, such as drink, the Bible seems to take both sides of the argument! WHICH IS RIGHT?

ILLUS - TELL STORY ABOUT HAIR CHECK AND MY WEIGEL HAIRCUT

The Bible does talk about long hair on men, in a seemingly negative way. It also says in that same passage that women should have their heads covered. It's a passage that is hard to interpret, though, and it's only

mentioned there... just that once. Should men, therefore, keep their hair cut? Should women keep their heads covered?

Our good brother Alistair Begg, is fond of reminding us that when it comes to the Bible, "the main things are the plain things, and the plain things are the main things." But the things we are talking about are not the main things of the Bible message, nor are they usually things that we can find plain teaching about in our Bibles. So, does the Christian have complete freedom in such areas? How do we decide?

There is no doubt that there is value in the "list of dos and don'ts approach." The restrictions I lived under during those years did not in any way harm me, and they did ensure my testimony stayed clean, and they did free me from distraction so I could concentrate on what I was there for. I regret none of it, and thank God for the lessons learned during those years.

Our military knows the value of the "do's and don'ts" approach. Our public school system used to, and ought to take a refresher course in it.

ILLUS - In 7th grade, I heard my teacher say, "Don't talk while I'm out of the room." Once he was out of the room, I turned to a friend (as did half the class), and started to talk! When the teacher returned, he asked, "Be honest, now... how many of you talked while I was out of class?" Thinking he was just messing around, a bunch of us raised our hands. About 3 minutes later, I had assumed the position and received a swat from a very ugly paddle! And from that time, I don't recall ever ignoring a teacher who said, "Don't talk while I'm out of the room!"

So... Is the "list of dos and don'ts" method of deciding right?

There is another approach, of course. That is to say that as Christians there are no restrictions on our behavior. Everything is acceptable. "Don't tell me what I can and cannot do, Preacher. I am free in Christ to do anything I want." Some take the book of Galatians, which our Branches Class is currently studying, in just that way. After all, the book does say, *Galatians 5:1 Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. (KJV)*

Interestingly, that seems to be exactly what was happening in Corinth. (EXPLAIN QUOTE MARKS AND PROVERB) They had come to believe that *All things are lawful (vs. 12)*. Since Bible scholars date the book of Galatians earlier than 1 Corinthians, it is even possible they were referring to Paul's own teaching in that saying.

Now many are quick to point out the abuses in the "list of dos and don'ts" method, but Corinth provides a stern warning of the dangers of the other extreme. Corinth was a debauched city. It was the Las Vegas of its day, a place where sin was open and rampant. The culture accepted and glorified sexual promiscuity, and prostitution was rampant. Apparently, such thinking was a constant problem in the church, and if we had time to study this passage more fully this morning, we would see that there were apparently some who heard Paul say, *all things are lawful for me* and decided it was ok for them to engage in fornication, or cavort with the prostitutes that were everywhere. After all, *all things are lawful for me!*

Verse 13 - Foods for the stomach, and the stomach for foods was apparently another common proverb used to justify these things. God made our appetites, and he also made the things that can satisfy them. Therefore, they must be ok.

How do we decide? The "list of dos and don'ts" method has certainly been abused, and so, according to our Bibles, can the *all things are lawful for me* method be abused.

How do we decide?

Well, it's instructive that Paul did not institute a list of "dos and don'ts" here. Neither did he condemn their *all things are lawful for me* approach. He DID, however, place some very useful limits on it, and provide principals that can help us, as we wrestle with issues like the Corinthians did, to answer the question, How Do We Decide?

if the Lord allows, I would like to point out three principals Paul taught in this passage - three principals that can be applied to all kinds of issues.

Is it good?

Now REMEMBER, we are not talking about things the Bible clearly addresses. We are talking about peripheral issues... things the Bible is silent on, or ambiguous on... things where the Bible seems to leave us a choice. And for THESE TYPES OF THINGS, Paul gives this principal:

All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. (1 Corinthians 6:12a)

I initially had this point as "Is it the BEST?" But as I continued to repeat *verse 12* over and over to myself, I could not escape the fact that it does not say that. a couple other translations may help:

"Everything is permissible for me"--but not everything is beneficial. (NIV)

"All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. (ESV)

You may say, "I am allowed to do anything." But I reply, "Not everything is good for you." (NLT)

Paul agrees that we have liberty in Christ, but limits that liberty, reminding them that Christians are to do the things that are GOOD. We have no liberty to do BAD things. We are not free to SIN. Sexual sin (i.e. fornication, adultery, homosexuality, incest, etc.) is CLEARLY dealt with in the Bible. And yet, the Corinthians were abusing the principal of Christian liberty by saying it gave them a right to do these things that the Bible so clearly calls wrong... SIN.

(NKJV) Romans 6:15 What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!

Paul's emphatic *CERTAINLY NOT* to the question of "is it ok for a Christian to visit a prostitute" (cf. vs. 15) says the same thing in the same emphatic way. Our freedom in Christ is NEVER freedom to engage in sin.

We are free to do all things, as long as they are GOOD.

READ - *Ephesians 4:20-30* and notice especially the use of the word "GOOD." In vs. 28 we are to DO GOOD, and in vs. 29 we are to BE GOOD.

DO GOOD... SAY GOOD... BE GOOD.... That is the goal of the believer, in all things.

Here, then, is the first principal for deciding on questionable things. The next time you face such an issue, and the question, "How do I decide if I should do this?" comes to mind, ask another question - IS IT GOOD? If it is not, then do it not! Make it a motto that "I will do things that are GOOD. If they are not GOOD, I will avoid them.

Can it enslave?

1 Corinthians 6:12b ... all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any. (NKJV)

ILLUS - I have told you before of the lady who visited this church when I attended as a teenager. She made a powerful impression on my young mind, even though I remember very little about her, and have not, to my knowledge, seen her since. She was a smoker, and struggled with that habit. She came once to the services, and during the invitation came to the front, holding a pack of cigarettes high, and reaching the front, she knelt and laid the cigarettes on the steps. She was giving her habit to the Lord and asking help in kicking it. Some months later, she showed up again. And repeated the same performance. The habit still had her enslaved.

Again, Paul did not dispute the Corinthians' claim that *All things are lawful*, or "we have freedom in Christ," but he did limit it. We might paraphrase his statement as "Yes, all things ARE lawful, but we must not allow ourselves to be controlled, or enslaved by anything, and some things can and do lead to that."

People are enslaved to all kinds of things today: Alcohol, tobacco, drugs, sex, pornography, entertainment, pleasure, money, debt... you might think of others to add to the list.

Our bodies are easily enslaved, for our bodies are still broken by sin.

ILLUS - Dr. Tom Malone, my pastor when living in Pontiac, Michigan, used to say, "When you got saved, nothing happened to your bodies." And he was right.

Notice the wonderful description Paul gave here of what DID happen when the Corinthians were saved. (cf. vs. 11)

- They were WASHED (referring to the work of regeneration done by the Holy Spirit, washing away their sins.)

(NKJV) Titus 3:5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit,

(BTW - The physical washing of baptism is a PICTURE of this spiritual washing of regeneration.)

- They were JUSTIFIED (referring to the fact that they now had a right standing before God and were DECLARED RIGHTEOUS in His mind).

(NKJV) Romans 5:1 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

(NKJV) Romans 5:9 Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him.

You are declared righteous in the mind of God. Just as righteous as Jesus Christ! Just as if you had never sinned at all! Just as if you had never been lost! Amazing grace of our loving Lord!

- They were SANCTIFIED

I saved this one for last, because I want to ensure we understand it. Sanctification is the process by which we become more and more like Christ. It starts with salvation (with the washing of regeneration by the Holy Spirit, and our justification in the mind of God), and it will end when we get to heaven. But in between the starting and ending point, it is a PROCESS.

"NOTHING HAPPENED TO YOUR BODIES" was Dr Malone's way of reminding us that we still dwell in the same sin filled and sin sick bodies we dwelt in when we got saved. And we WILL dwell in them until we get to heaven.

1 Corinthians 6:12b ... all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any. (NKJV)

Now if our bodies were not in danger of enslavement, Paul would not have needed to say these things. But they are, and so he did!

ILLUS - Lindsey Lohan was much in the news recently for her horrible problems with addiction. I am quite certain that Lindsey did not wake up one morning and decide, "I think I'll become addicted to drugs and destroy my life and career today." But I do think one day she woke up and decided to try something new... to dabble in something that seemed harmless. She might have known it was dangerous, but she thought she could handle it. It had the power to enslave her, though, and it did just that.

Paul gave the Corinthians a second principal here... a second way to answer the question, "How do I decide?" Another question to ask when we stand wondering whether or not we should engage in a particular activity or behavior - DOES THIS THING HAVE THE POWER TO ENSLAVE ME?

And if the answer to that question is YES, then we should avoid the activity.

Is it a right use of my body?

(NKJV) 1 Corinthians 6:15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not!

(NKJV) 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

There is a common refrain spouted across our land, "This is my body and I can do what I want with it." It is an argument used ad nauseum in the abortion debate, but it doesn't stop there. People use it to justify just about any behavior they want to engage in.

Just one problem for you and I as Christians, though - it is simply not true. It's not my body - it belongs to God. It's not my body, it was bought and paid for by the blood of Jesus Christ! It belongs to HIM.

In salvation we are united with Christ - we become, in a sense, one with Him. That's Paul's point in vs. 15 . And not only that, but we are, from the moment of our salvation, indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God. It's one of the more fascinating and amazing aspects of the Christian experience! Consider it... think on it... when you got saved, the Holy Spirit of God actually took up residence within you! That's Paul's point in vs. 19 .

And so we see his third principal... his third way of dealing with the question, "How do I decide?" - Is it a right use of the body which Jesus died to purchase, which now belongs to Him, and which is indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God?

The Corinthians went so far as to say frequenting a prostitute was perfectly acceptable behavior - after all, "All things are lawful" and "Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods." God made me with this appetite, and He made the prostitutes who can fulfill it, so it must be ok! NEVER, said Paul. Your body is Christ's body! What you do, Christ is right there with you!

QUOTE (Barnes) May we remember that we are not our own. We belong to God. We have been ransomed by sacred blood. By a reference to the value of that blood; by all its preciousness and worth; by all the sighs, and tears, and groans that bought us; by the agonies of the cross, and the bitter pains of the death of God's own Son, we are bound to live to God, and to him alone. When we are tempted to sin, let us think of the cross. When Satan spreads out his allurements, let us recall the remembrance of the sufferings of Calvary, and remember that all these sorrows were endured that we might be pure. Oh, how would sin appear were we beneath the cross, and did we feel the warm blood from the Saviour's open veins trickle upon us! Who would dare indulge in sin there? Who could do otherwise than devote himself, body and soul and spirit, unto God?

Strong and convicting words, but useful to contemplate.

The third principal, then, is, "Is it a right use of my body, which is not mine, but God's?"

Conclusion:

When we next take up this topic, we will notice that Paul's arguments are not done. He provides several other principals further on in *1 Corinthians* ... principals like "Does it offend others?" and "Does it help

or hinder the spread of the gospel?" and "Does it build others up or tear them down?" You can read about those in *1 Corinthians 8,9,10*

But we will stop now and leave those thoughts for later.

Oh, Christian, there is no better life than that of the believer in Jesus Christ. We have a freedom in Him that is out of this world. And we have a quality of life that cannot be matched by anything the world has to offer.

John 10:10 "The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly. (NKJV)

... or, as other translations put it, *My purpose is to give life in all its fulness. (NLT) I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (NIV)*

Believer, Jesus does not only give eternal quantity of life, but also eternal QUALITY. We need to see the restrictions He places on our lives in that light - not as things meant to hold us back, or steal our joy, or hinder our lives.

On the contrary - the restrictions on our behavior are not really restrictions at all - they are guides put in place by a loving Father Who knows best, and Who wants us to have the fullest and most wonderful of lives. Trust Him with your life, Christian - He will not hurt you. Do things His way, Christian - He will not keep you from joy and happiness. He wants only your best.

ILLUS - My neighbors, Lenny and Terry and their little boy Cory used to live behind me. They have attended here a few times. Nice folks. I pulled into their driveway once to visit with Lenny for a minute. I was on my motorcycle, and as I sat on it talking with Lenny, I noticed Cory's attention was riveted on the bike. He kept inching closer and closer to it. He was just itching to touch it... to sit on it. Like any little boy, he thought that gleaming bike was pretty cool. But he was getting dangerously close to exhaust system which was very very hot. And so, I simply smiled at him and put a hand down between him and the bike and said, "Hot! Can't touch."

In a similar fashion, our loving father protects us. Are we free to do anything? Paul did not dispute that fact. But he did give us some guidelines to help us interpret that freedom. Is it GOOD? Does it have the power to ENSLAVE me? Is it a right use of this body, which belongs to Christ?

In other words - Our freedom in Christ is limited to what is good, safe, and honoring to God.

Chapter 5. Reasons, or Excuses?

READ - Acts 24

TEXT - Acts 24:25 *Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and answered, "Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you." (NKJV)*

THEME - The lesson from Felix is to ACT when the trembling is there. For it may never return again.

Introduction:

IN THIS CHAPTER we see Paul on trial before Felix, who was the Roman governor at the time. We see Paul's enemies bring their charges against him, having hired a high-powered attorney named Tertullus to make their case. We also see Paul, without representation, defend himself against the charges. We see Felix hearing both sides of the case, and seeming to recognize Paul's innocence. But Felix was notoriously corrupt and cared more about what he could personally gain from Paul than about justice for Paul. So, in an attempt to extort a bribe from Paul, Felix let the proceedings drag on for 2 more years, all the while keeping Paul in prison, and all the while trying to convince him to pay his way to freedom.

At the end of the chapter we see Felix term ending and Festus taking his place. As we will learn in *chapter 25*, Festus was a much more honest judge who, when he hears the case, will immediately conclude Paul is innocent.

IN THIS CHAPTER we see three main characters: Paul, Felix, and Drusilla

1. Paul needs no introduction at this point in our study. He is the hero of the majority of the book of *Acts*.
2. Felix needs some explanation.

QUOTE (Boice, p. 388) - "Felix was the Roman governor. He had status, but his background had not been particularly distinguished. He had been a slave, then became a freedman under Claudius. He pandered to the depravity of the Emperor and rose and the court until he was finally awarded the governorship of Judea. He was corrupt in his administration and was hated by the Jews. His time as governor was characterized by graft. His wife was a teenager whom he stole from another king. Finally, the corruption of his rule became so great that Nero, who was no great model of morality himself, recalled him. He would have been executed if his brother, who was in Rome at the time, had not pleaded on his behalf. This was the man before whom Paul now appeared to give an accounting."

3. And Drusilla doesn't get much space in the account, but seems to have played a role.

QUOTE (Easton's Bible Dictionary) third and youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I. (Acts 12:1-4, 20-23). Felix, the Roman procurator of Judea, induced her to leave her husband, Azizus, the king of Emesa, and become his wife. She was present with Felix when Paul reasoned of "righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come" (Acts 24:24). She and her son perished in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, A.D. 79.

IN THIS CHAPTER there is a fascinating conversation between Paul and Felix. If Drusilla spoke, it is not recorded for us, but the exchange between the prisoner and governor IS recorded, and it is very instructive. Notice that little exchange in *vss. 24-26*. And let's spend our remaining minutes today on that conversation.

I entitled today's message "Reasons, or Excuses?" I chose this title primarily because of two phrases in our text - Paul's method - "*he reasoned*" and Felix's response - "*when I have a convenient time.*" Paul gave REASONS that should have persuaded Felix to be saved. Felix gave his REASON (actually, his excuse) for rejecting Christ.

The Reasons of Paul

I like the way the Holy Spirit chose to word this. *He reasoned...* I don't want to make more of this word than the Bible intends to, here, but it is interesting to me that it is used. *He reasoned...*

It might indicate, I suppose, a particular style or method of approach. Whereas right now I am preaching, and that is a particular style or approach one might use in speaking to another, Paul may have used a different style here - *he reasoned*. The thought would seem to be that he discussed... dialogued... provided reasonable argument and evidence to back up his points.

Of course, Paul always had sound evidence and reason behind his words, no matter the style he chose to use in presenting them.

Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ." (Acts 17:2-3 NKJV)

In that verse, Paul's preaching and reasoning are equated. Whether he stood and preached / lectured, or dialoged with somebody one on one, Paul's words were steeped in REASON. And for that reason I like the word choice - *he REASONED*. It reminds me that what we believe is reasonable... factual... sound... scientific... demonstrable. What I believe, and the gospel I preach is based on sound historical fact. It is eminently reasonable. I can proclaim it without fearing whether people think I'm a nut or not. Regardless of what people think - it is true... it is fact... it bears the witness of history, and of archaeology and any other "ology" you want to throw at it. It is REASONABLE.

I like that. It should embolden us all. It certainly emboldened Paul, who fearlessly discussed the gospel with Felix - a man who literally held Paul's life in his hands.

He reasoned...

And in doing so, he reasoned about 3 truths.

1. He reasoned about righteousness.

Greek - DIKAIOSYNE - There seem to be two basic meanings to this Greek word - 1) in a broad sense: state of him who is as he ought to be, righteousness, the condition acceptable to God and 2) in a narrower sense, justice or the virtue which gives each his due.

I think a simple definition of RIGHTEOUSNESS is "being right with God."

Felix wanted to hear about the *faith in Christ (vs. 24)* and Paul started off with a discussion of the standard of righteousness God expects - a standard of righteousness that no man, apart from Jesus Christ, can attain.

Jesus described this standard of righteousness in His sermon on the mount. READ - *Matthew 5:40-48*. That last verse is not a misprint - these are the words of the Son of God - they describe the standard one must reach in order to be RIGHT WITH GOD - PERFECTION. HOLINESS. RIGHTEOUSNESS.

but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:15-16 NKJV)

Paul started with NEED. "Felix, you are not right with God. You are a sinner. You are lost. Your own best efforts are insufficient to attain to the righteous standard God demands of you." I can imagine Paul rattling off words like:

All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23 KJV)

For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not. (Ecclesiastes 7:20 KJV)

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8 KJV)

But we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, Have taken us away. (Isaiah 64:6 NKJV)

Perhaps Felix responded, "What do you mean by that, Paul?" and Paul made it clearer - *We are all infected and impure with sin. When we proudly display our righteous deeds, we find they are but filthy rags. Like autumn leaves, we wither and fall. And our sins, like the wind, sweep us away. (Isaiah 64:6 NLT)*

YOU ARE NOT right with God, Felix. That's how Paul started his presentation of the *faith in Christ*.

Now consider to whom Paul was making these remarks - to Felix - one who made a practice of UNrighteousness... one who was known for his INjustice... one who, despite the fact that Paul had demonstrated his innocence, as would be seen when a more just judge came to the bench two years later, kept him imprisoned for 2 years in hopes of getting a bribe from him.

It's doubtful that such a notorious sinner as Felix needed a lot of convincing that he was unrighteous.

ILLUS - I know a man who when pressed about his need for salvation responds with disbelief. "I do not need to be saved," he says, believing his lifestyle attains what the Bible denies is possible for anyone - the perfect standard of righteousness God demands.

2. He reasoned about temperance (self-control).

GREEK - EGKRATEIA - "self-control, the control of the passions and desires, often used regarding the control of sexual desires." (Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament)

If Paul's reasoned discussion about righteousness, and God's impossibly high expectations of holiness was not enough to make Felix squirm, this part of the conversation certainly would have. After all, this word refers to the control of our passions and appetites, and Felix was not known as one who practiced self-control.

Seated beside him was Drusilla, with whom he was currently engaged in an adulterous relationship. Perhaps Paul moved from the general - "*all have sinned and come short of the glory of God,*" to the specific - "*Take your relationship with Drusilla, for example, which is clearly a violation of God's righteous standard, Felix.*" I never cease to be in awe of the boldness of Paul.

An interesting side note - one ancient source says Felix kept Paul bound for 2 years at the insistence of Drusilla - perhaps she didn't like him pointing out her sin?

3. He reasoned about the judgement to come.

Paul had described the impossibly high standard of righteousness God demands.

He had then moved to specifics, perhaps drawing Felix and Drusilla's minds toward the areas in their own lives where they were, even now, violating that standard of righteousness.

He concluded with the harsh reality of where those choices would ultimately lead them - the judgement to come. It was another of those topics Paul used frequently:

ILLUS - In Athens, he had mentioned the judgement to come - "*He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.*" (Acts 17:31 NKJV)

So here is Paul, standing before this man, Felix who has the power to release him, or not... Felix, who holds his future, and I suppose his very life, in his hands... and Paul basically says to him, "Felix, you are not living up to God's standard of righteousness... you are lost... your adulterous relationship with Drusilla is just one example of how far short you fall of being right with God. And Felix, you may be a judge in this world, but in the next you will stand before a righteous judge Who takes no bribes, and you will answer for these things... you will give an account."

WOW!

It's out of vogue to talk about hell, I suppose... or the judgement to come. I was speaking with a Christian one time and mentioned the judgement seat of Christ, and they rolled their eyes at me as if to say, "There you go again, preacher, talking about the judgement to come." BUT, IT IS CLEARLY TAUGHT IN THE BIBLE:

But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. (Romans 14:10 KJV)

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (2 Corinthians 5:10 NKJV)

Now the Judgment Seat of Christ is for the saved - it's not a judgment for sin, for the Christian's sins were done away with by Jesus on the cross. The judgment seat of Christ is a judgment of our service as followers of Christ. Most say it is primarily a good thing - a handing out of rewards. But it is a JUDGMENT, and all believers must face it, and when it comes up in conversation, most don't want to think about it.

That attitude is even more prevalent when we are referring to the judgment of the lost!

While sitting in airports this past week, I started reading a biography of Jonathan Edwards, a great preacher of the 1700s, credited by most as the impetus behind the great awakening that took place in New England during those years. Edwards was a fabulous preacher. His sermons are wonderful to read even today. The power that accompanied his words can be felt as you read them, 200 years after he preached them. His most famous sermon is entitled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," and is easily one of my favorite sermons of all time. Here are a couple of quotes from that sermon showing Edward's powerful word pictures of the judgment to come:

Unconverted men walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering, and there are innumerable places in this covering so weak that they will not bear their weight, and these places are not seen.

Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness, would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock.

Good stuff! But I mention it this morning because the biographer took Edwards to task for it, clearly believing Edwards should not have been so harsh in speaking about hell. But PAUL DIDN'T SHY AWAY FROM IT. The "*judgment to come*" which Paul described to Felix is a Bible truth:

READ - *Psalm 1:3-6*

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, Some to everlasting life, Some to shame and everlasting contempt. (Daniel 12:2 NKJV)

READ - *Revelation 20:11-15*

So, let's review Paul's reasoning before Felix and Drusilla. I imagine his presentation going something like this:

"Most noble Felix, you asked me about faith in Christ. In response, let me say first of all that you, most noble Felix, are a sinner. God's standard of righteousness is impossibly high. All are sinners and fall far short of that standard, including you. As an example, Felix, just consider the woman sitting beside you. God requires self-control. He demands that we govern our sexual passions and appetites, but you and Drusilla are even now engaged in an adulterous relationship. This ought not to be, and is displeasing to God, Felix. It is sin, the result of which is that you are lost. If you don't get right with God you will die lost and remain forever lost. You will face the judgement of God as a lost man and will be cast into hell forever and ever and ever. After a million years or so, Felix, you will still remember this conversation you and I had about God's righteousness... your lack of self-control... and the judgement to come. But it doesn't have to end that way, Felix. You asked me about 'faith in Christ' and I can tell you that that is the answer. If you will put your faith in Christ, His righteousness will become yours, and you will no longer fall short of God's standard. God will see His perfection, not your weakness, and God will accept you into heaven when you die, and you need never fear hell. Will you put your faith in Christ, Felix?"

The scene is almost unbelievable. Puny Paul stands as a prisoner before the judge - Felix. Felix has made it clear, and will continue to do so for 2 more years, that he wants a bribe before he will consider releasing Paul. He makes it clear to Paul, the prisoner, that he holds his life in his hands. Paul has already proven his innocence, and when Festus becomes governor (cf. vs. 27) he will review the case and immediately conclude Paul is innocent. It is all about playing Felix's game, and all Paul needs do is cough up a bribe and he can be freed.

WHY didn't Paul just cough up the money? Refusal to do so would cost him 2 years of his life in prison... 2 years that could have been spent preaching the gospel, perhaps on another missionary journey. Why?

For one thing, we know enough about Paul to know he would never think it right to do wrong. Paying the bribe would be unjust. He would do right, and trust God to take care of him. A lesson to us all, there. Christians should ALWAYS do right. It is NEVER RIGHT to do the WRONG THING.

QUOTE (Mark Twain) - Always do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest.

More importantly than that... it will please God.

But I suggest a greater motivation - he cared about the soul of Felix. For the next 2 years he would witness to him over and over and over (cf. vs. 26). What a soul winner was Paul! No wonder he nearly single handedly reached the known world with the gospel! May God give me... give us... a dose of his soul-winning zeal, that we might reach our families, and our friends, and our community for Christ!

QUOTE (Barnes) - His (i.e. Paul's) boldness in this instance is the more remarkable, as he was dependent on Felix for his pardon. A timeserver or an impostor would have chosen such topics as would have conciliated the favour of the judge, and procured his pardon, he would have flattered his vanity, or palliated his vices. But such an idea never seems to have occurred to Paul. His aim was to defend the truth, and to save, if possible, the souls of Drusilla and of Felix.

Every person we meet needs to hear about righteousness, temperance, and the judgement to come. Every person needs Jesus! But most of us go blindly through life letting the Felixes and Drusillas pass us by, never giving a thought to their condition... to their need... to their doom.

ILLUS - On our vacation this past week, we took a little bus tour around the city. As we huddled with the other tourists who had signed up for the tour, waiting for the bus, I noticed one young man who was loud and obnoxious. He was holding a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other and was behaving

rudely. It was only 1:00 in the afternoon, but he was already three sheets to the wind. When the tour bus driver appeared, he immediately told this man that he could not smoke on the bus. The man complied by flicking the cigarette to the ground and stamping it out with his foot. "You can't drink on the bus, either," said the driver. "I can't DRINK?" said the man incredulously. The driver was adamant, though, and the man swigged down the remainder of his brew and got on the bus. He sat behind me and complained that he was dying for a beer every couple minutes throughout the tour. One of our destinations was a little zoo, and when we got out to view it, he immediately inquired whether there was someplace he could get a beer. There was. He did, and throughout the park he had a beer in his hand. Now I have to confess something to my shame. I didn't like this guy. He was messing up my trip, and the good time I had hoped for for my family. He was loud, rude, obnoxious, and semi-inebriated. I thought he was a jerk and wished he would go away. But then we got back on the bus, and somebody had already taken his seat. He sat down next to me. He smacked me on the leg and said, "How ya doin' man?" and smiled at me. It was a simple little gesture but God used it to smite my heart to the ground. Suddenly I saw, not an obnoxious jerk, but an enslaved alcoholic who desperately needed help. I wish I would have had the zeal of Paul right then... I would have told him of righteousness, and of temperance, and of the judgement to come. I would have told him about the One Who could save Him from His addictions and problems. Paul would have told him about Jesus. I should have.

Most men in Paul's state would have looked at Felix as a way out. Most would have taken him up on his offer and paid his bribe. Most would have walked out of that prison a free man and not given a second thought. But Paul didn't see Felix that way. He saw a lost soul, for whom Jesus died.

Everyday they pass me by.
I can see it in their eyes.
Empty faces filled with care,
Headed who knows where.

On they go through private pain,
Living fear to fear.
Laughter hides their silent cries,
Only Jesus hears.

People need the Lord.
When will we realize -
People need the Lord!

The "Reasons" of Felix and Drusilla.

We all claim to have reasons for why we believe, or why we respond as we do. These two were no different - both had a reason or reasons for how they reacted to the gospel. Drusilla's are not mentioned, but we can make an educated guess as to their substance.

Now, I am contrasting their "reasons" with those of Paul, but I realize they are not equal. Where Paul's reasoning was grounded in truth and fact, their's was not - their "reasons," like so many of ours, are just excuses.

Neither responded positively to Paul's reasoned presentation of the gospel. Neither was saved that day. We have no record that either was ever saved.

Felix explained his "reason" for not putting his faith in Christ - it was not a convenient time - cf. vs. 25 . One wonders what appointment on his calendar was more important than securing eternal life for his immortal soul! It was a ridiculous excuse, but it was, nonetheless, what Felix gave as his reason for not trusting Christ that day.

The Bible is silent about Drusilla. We don't know anything about her response, but the silence would seem to indicate that she, too, rejected the opportunity that day. Some have theorized that because she was a Jew, and had been raised with these words and concepts, they did not affect her as much. Whereas we see Felix tremble in fear as Paul concludes his presentation, we see no such response from Drusilla. Perhaps like many today, she had heard it so much that it no longer made an impression on her. Perhaps like many today, she felt her religion somehow shielded her from these truths. Perhaps she had the "I was raised in church, and therefore I must be OK" mentality that many have even today in 21st century America. We can only guess, for the Bible does not say.

And so both of them met Paul's reasoning about righteousness and temperance and the judgement to come, with rejection. Both walked away, and as far as we know, both died lost.

I wonder about you, this morning.

I wonder how many in a crowd this size do not yet know Jesus Christ... have not yet called upon the name of the Lord and been saved... have not yet believed on the Lord Jesus Christ... have not yet received Him as their personal Savior and Lord... have not yet been born again, without which Jesus plainly said no man can see heaven.

I wonder about you, this morning. And I wonder what excuses you throw up when you hear the gospel presented... when you hear about righteousness, and temperance, and judgement to come. What excuse do you throw up in the face of God's truth?

Whatever it is, it is an excuse. It is not a reason. Whatever it is, you need to cast it aside and run to Jesus while you still can. For the righteous demands of God apply to you, my friend. His demand of self-control and righteousness apply to YOU. And the judgement to come WILL COME to you, just as it will for everybody else. And there will be no excuses for those who refused to hear.

Conclusion:

Well, Paul gave a reasoned presentation of the gospel. And Felix gave a "reason" (actually an excuse) for why he rejected it.

But one other thing of note happened in this chapter that we must notice in closing this morning.

Felix trembled.

Now what, I ask you, could have made the mighty and all-powerful governor tremble? Surely it was not the puny, trembling, battered and bruised and broken prison who stood before him! Every evidence we have about Paul suggests frailty and weakness. He, himself, admitted to having little in the way of eloquence, and even admitted his enemies were correct when they assessed his speaking style as "unimpressive."

Felix trembled!

Why?

He trembled because Paul was not the only one speaking! When we hear the Word of God... the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit comes alongside the soul-winner and confirms the Word of God in our heart. That's Who Felix heard that day, and that's why he trembled and became afraid!

Felix trembled!

He was so close! So close to being born again... so close to salvation... so close to gaining heaven and avoiding hell... all he had to do was reach out and accept the gift!

But he didn't do it. He sent Paul away. He stopped his ears to the truth and let the moment pass. Notice that Felix did recognize his need - *I will send for you again when it's convenient...* (vs. 25) He did not dismiss the truth... he just postponed it.

And he DID send for him - Felix DID hear from Paul many times after this. But there is no evidence that he ever heard from the Holy Spirit again - no repetition of the trembling conviction that had once convinced him of the truth.

QUOTE (Barnes) "When a sinner is awakened, and sees his past sins, if he rejects the appeal to his conscience then, and defers it to a more convenient opportunity, he has no reason to expect that his attention will ever be again called with deep interest to the subject. He may live; but he may live without the strivings of the Holy Spirit. When a man has once deliberately rejected the offers of mercy; when he has trifled with the influences of the Spirit of God, he has no right or reason to expect that that Spirit will ever strive with him again. Such, we have too much reason to fear was the case with Felix. Though he often saw Paul again, and "communed with him," yet there is no account that he was again alarmed or awakened. "

Felix lost the governorship two years later, and passed out from under Paul's influence. I was unable to find out when he died. There is no evidence that he was ever saved.

Drusilla apparently died in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 AD, along with her son. There is no evidence that she was ever saved.

ILLUS - Many years ago, I witnessed to a young man in his home. I spoke with him for hours, answering question after question. He, like Felix, trembled under the conviction of the Holy Spirit. I could literally feel God's presence in the room. I pressed him for a decision - "Wouldn't you like to come to Christ today... right now... you can get right with God right now!" But to my dismay, he shook off the conviction and said, "I think I'll wait until Sunday and do it in church." "Sunday may not come," I reminded him. "You have no guarantee of making it that far." "No, I'm sure. I will definitely be there, and I will definitely accept Christ then." You know the ending, of course. He never came. I never saw him again. I wonder often whether God ever gave him another chance.

That man was a Felix. And my friend, I can tell you that there are many Felix's in this world. There may be a couple in this room today. Men and women who hear the truth, KNOW the truth because the Holy Spirit convicts them of it, and yet POSTPONE their acceptance, thinking they'll deal with it another day.

But there was no other day for Felix. And there may be no other day for you. The lesson from Felix is to ACT when the trembling is there. For it may never return again.

Chapter 6. How Do We Decide

(Part 2)

Introduction:

A couple of weeks ago we began a study entitled "How Do We Decide?"

In our first attempt at answering that question, we concentrated on *1 Corinthians 6* where Paul reminded the Corinthians that even though *all things are lawful for me*, all things are not always acceptable to the believer. He mentioned three major questions a Christian should ask when trying to determine whether a behavior, or an action, or a practice, is something that a Christian should be involved with. Those three questions are:

1. Is it GOOD? (cf. *1 Corinthians 6:12a*)
2. Can it ENSLAVE me? (cf. *1 Corinthians 6:12b*)
3. Is it a right use of my body? (cf. *1 Corinthians 6:15, 19-20*)

We came to understand, based on *1 Corinthians 6*, that a Christian has wonderful liberty in Christ, but that liberty is limited. It is limited to what is good, safe, and honoring to God.

When you are faced with deciding whether something is appropriate for you to do, or whether a particular place is appropriate for you to be, or whether a particular program is appropriate to view, take the *1 Corinthians 6* challenge... apply the *1 Corinthians 6* tests - is it GOOD... is it SAFE... and does it HONOR your temple? If all we learn from these studies are those three principals, we will go a long way toward avoiding things that God wants us to avoid.

The Corinthians had written to Paul with a series of questions. (cf. *1 Corinthians 7:1*) In our text (*chapter 8*) Paul is answering one of those questions - "Is it ok for us to eat meat offered to idols?"

Let's understand the issue - meat offered to idols:

QUOTE (Abbott) - "Among the heathen nations in those days, animals were offered in sacrifice, to idols, and then, after some part of the flesh had been consumed by fire, the remainder was restored to the owner for use as food, and sent to the markets for sale; or feasts in honor of the false deity were prepared from it, in or near the temple. Now, many of the Jews supposed that if they ate food which had been thus offered to idols, even ignorantly, they were partakers of the sin of idolatry."

This may not seem specifically relevant to us today, but the principal is. Basically, the question could be restated in more general terms as, "Is it ok to do something when we know there is nothing wrong with it, but other people think there IS something wrong with it?"

Paul's response is instructive:

FIRST a warning - ok, so you think you have an understanding of this matter. You have KNOWLEDGE. But be careful with that, because knowledge CAN make you arrogant... puffed up. Good reminder to all of us as we study our Bibles. We must never get superior in our attitude. We must not look down on younger, less learned believers just because we have a clearer understanding of the Scriptures than them. (vs. 1)

SECOND a mild rebuke - even if you think you have a pretty good idea of what's right and wrong in this instance, you are nowhere near where you ought to be. The most learned of us has a lot to learn! vs. 2) (COULD USE SOME ILLUSTRATIONS HERE - James Herriot - horse?)

THIRD an acknowledgement - you are right - an idol is nothing, there IS only one God, and even though other false gods are spoken of in this world, and idols are created as part of the misguided worship of those false gods, WE KNOW that they are false... nothing... and there is only ONE TRUE GOD, and only ONE WAY to that God - the Lord Jesus Christ - vss. 4-6

FOURTH - his answer, in vss. 7-12.

FIFTH - his personal example (vs. 13)

In the time remaining, let's concentrate on those last two - his answer, and his personal example. Let's spend our time in vss. 7-13. None of us are going to be faced with the question of whether we should eat meat offered to idols, but all of us will be faced with other questions. Maybe even today we will find ourselves asking, "How Do I Decide" in regards to a specific activity.

We are in a one room schoolhouse. (vs. 7)

Cast your minds back to Little House on the Prairie, or The Waltons. Old and young, all in the same classroom. Great picture of the local church, don't you think?

Look around this room, today. You will notice some Christians who have been saved for decades. You will see some who are in the first year of their walk with Christ. You will see some who you know to be very knowledgeable in their Bibles. You will see some who are barely learning the basics of Bible truth.

These verses have really challenged me this week. Consider Paul's words - ... *there is not in everyone that knowledge* (vs. 7). Everybody is NOT at the same level in with respect to their understanding of Bible truth. Some might just be starting out. Some are where you were many years ago.

And the danger is, that as we mature in Christ, and as we gain more and more understanding of Bible truths, it sure is easy to start looking down on those who aren't at the same level, isn't it?

ILLUS - In my secular career I work in IT. I have worked with computers and technology for 35 years. I have more than adequate knowledge of computers, and would even be called, by some, an expert of sorts. As such, I am called on from time to time to answer a question put to me by someone with lesser knowledge. And I confess that the longer I am in the business, the less patience I have with "newbie" questions. I hear somebody ask me something that I asked and learned the answer to 20 years ago, and my mind screams with impatience. It is wrong, and I know it, but it is also how I feel sometimes.

Apparently, the Corinthians were in danger of just such an arrogance regarding spiritual things.

YOU might know the truth about idols, but there are some, maybe just newly added to the kingdom, babes in Christ, who have lived all their lives in a culture of idols. It might seem absolutely ridiculous to you, but it is NOT to THEM.

ILLUS - Catholics believe in and observe Mass. At its heart, Mass is a re-enactment of the crucifixion of Christ. This re-enactment takes place in their observance of what we also observe every Lord's Day - communion. However, Catholics believe that when the priest blesses the bread and wine, the bread literally and miraculously is changed into the body of Christ, and the wine literally and miraculously is changed into the blood of Christ. This belief is called "transubstantiation." When the priest places the host (the wafer of bread) on the tongue of the worshipper, he says "the body of Christ" because that is what they believe it is, at that moment. This is a great error in Catholicism. It is nowhere taught in the Bible. It is nonetheless BELIEVED by Catholics. Some years ago Beth and I attended another church in the area, and rejoiced when a young woman trusted Christ in one of the services. She had lived all her life in a Catholic home and had attended Catholic mass for years. She was used to receiving the "body of Christ" in the mass, and holding the bread in her mouth until it dissolved because she was convinced it was the baby Jesus. You don't chew the baby Jesus! The first time she observed communion with us, she held that big chunk of unleavened bread in her mouth throughout the entire service!

... there is not in everyone that knowledge... (vs. 7)

We don't want to hurt the little ones (vs. 9)

... beware lest this liberty become a stumbling block... (vs. 9)

DEFINITION - "stumbling block" = "cause of offense" or "occasion to sin."

QUOTE (Barnes) - "This is the reply of Paul to the argument of the Corinthians in 1Cor 8:8. "Though all that you say should be admitted to be true, as it must be; though a man is neither morally better nor worse for partaking of meat or abstaining from it; yet the grand principle to be observed is, so to act as not to injure your brethren. Though you may be no better or worse for eating or not eating, yet, if your conduct shall injure others, and lead them into sin, that is a sufficient guide to determine you what to do in the case. You should abstain entirely. It is of far more importance that your brother should not be led into sin, than it is that you should partake of meat which you acknowledge (1Cor 8:8) is in itself of no importance."

QUOTE (Barnes) - "You should be careful that by no conduct of yours your brother be led into sin. This is a general principle that is to regulate Christian conduct in all matters that are in themselves indifferent. "

Don't hurt the little ones! In a one room school house, the little kids weren't expected to be able to do all the big kids could, or know all the big kids knew. And certainly there would have been an expectation that the big kids should help care for the little ones.

ILLUS - I'm using a one-room school house to illustrate the truths in this chapter, but a big family might be another such illustration. While living in New Jersey, I was preparing for bed late one evening when my phone rang. A friend from Bible college was calling to tell me that he was on his way to a southern state, where he was taking a position in a church. His wife was pregnant, and in labor, and they were a few minutes from my house. Would I help? Of course I said yes, and within a few minutes his family was in my tiny house, and he and I were driving his wife to the hospital. They stayed with us for several days. They had 10 kids. If you've ever been in the presence of such a family, you notice pretty quickly that they all take care of each other. In some ways, the parents seem less stressed than in smaller families. The older kids take care of the younger kids.

There is an overriding principal of which Paul reminds his Corinthians siblings here - love is more important than knowledge (*vss. 1-2*)

QUOTE - People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.

In other words, as we look around on this one room schoolhouse that is FBC, or this ever-increasing family that is FBC, we need to remember that it is more important to show love for one another than to demonstrate our knowledge of Bible truths. Knowledge of Bible truth should lead to ever increasing demonstrations of love!

... beware lest this liberty become a stumbling block... (vs. 9)

Don't hurt the little ones!

Our actions might be harmless to us, while hurting others (vss. 10-12)

If they see you do it, they will be emboldened to do it. But since they still think an idol is something, they will think what they are doing is an act of worship of that idol, and rather than being helped in their growth away from idols and toward the things of God, they will be more confused than ever! They may even "perish" (or "be ruined" as MacArthur suggests is a better translation).

The thought here is not that they might lose their salvation, for such is not possible. Once you believe, you cannot become an unbeliever. Once you are saved, you cannot become lost. *If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature... (2 Corinthians 5:17 KJV)*

But the landscape is littered with little ones who have fallen away and become disillusioned... ruined... by the behavior of their bigger brothers and sisters.

Surely none of us want to be guilty of causing such disillusionment by our behavior. Surely all of us would be willing to sacrifice minor rights and privileges if the result is benefit to the little ones.

Now let me throw out this caveat - Paul is talking about people who really are younger in their walk and weaker in their faith. He is not talking about the "professional weaker brother" who has set up a stringent list of rules for himself and demands that all around him follow the same list. Nor is he talking about those nominal believers who just never seem to progress. They may have made a profession, but they never read their Bibles... seldom participate with the community of God, and never seem to grow, even after a long time in the faith. Such brothers and sisters need to be CORRECTED, not CODDLED. And you and I need not be constantly limited in the freedom of our walk with God because of such as that.

If you are still sucking milk from a bottle 20 years after you trusted Christ, don't expect the rest of us to join you in it! GROW UP in Him!

No, Paul's instructions concern the LITTLE ONES - the ones who are truly weaker and younger in their walk with God, and his conclusion is that there's nothing wrong with eating meat offered to idols, but there IS something wrong with causing such little ones to stumble in their faith. The former is NOT sin, just as they had surmised. But the latter IS sin... *sin against Christ. cf. Matthew 25:40 (KJV) And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*

Conclusion:

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter.

Based on Paul's answer to the question "is it right to eat meat offered to idols" we can add a fourth item to our checklist for deciding on peripheral or questionable things. That question is, COULD IT OFFEND?

Now remember the first 3 questions we learned in *chapter 6*? Is it GOOD, is it SAFE, and is it a RIGHT USE of my body? It's interesting, isn't it, that those three questions are all personal in nature. In other words, those three questions all deal with whether or not a thing is right for ME... will it hurt ME, or will it be a detriment to ME? All of us like those kinds of questions, because we are all selfish by nature. But this fourth question is not about ME. It's about somebody else... it's about OTHERS. It demands that we ignore the effect of a thing on ourselves, and consider only its affect on somebody else. This is not a matter of selfishness, but a matter of sacrifice. And that's where our faith gets hard, isn't it? That's what separates the men from the boys, and the women from the little girls.

Note

(Lord willing, we are going to add two more questions to our list in the next few weeks - "Does it help evangelize?" and "Does it build other believers up?" We will end up with six questions we can ask anytime we are trying to decide on the rightness or wrongness of a thing. The first 3 questions deal with how that thing affects us, personally, but the last 3 all deal with how that thing affects others.)

ILLUS - Rick Warren wrote a book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, a key theme of which is, "IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU."

It is easy to base decisions about our activities on how it affects us. It is a lot harder, isn't it, when the activity might be good for us, but harmful to someone else. Sacrifice is hard.

But sacrifice is Christ-like. He is our greatest example.

Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8 NLT)

Should not those of us who are strong, be willing to sacrifice for those who are weak? Should we not be willing to give up some of our rights, if that will keep them from being injured?

Paul's conclusion in *vs. 13* is one of the most challenging statements in the Bible. *If doing something causes a brother or sister to stumble, I will NEVER do it!* Only the brother who has attained MANHOOD in Christ, or the sister who has attained WOMANHOOD in Christ, will be able to accept it.

And only when we see things from the perspective of eternity will it begin to make sense.

SONG - Thank You For Giving To The Lord, by Ray Boltz:

I dreamed I went to Heaven, you were there with me.
We walked upon the streets of gold beside the Crystal Sea.
We heard the angels singing, then someone called your name.
You turned and saw this young man, and he was smiling as he came.
He said, "Friend you may not know me now," and then he said, "But wait -
You used to teach my Sunday School, when I was only eight.
And every week you would say a prayer before the class would start.
And one day when you said that prayer,
I asked Jesus in my heart."

Then another man stood before you, he said "Remember the time,
A missionary came to your church, His pictures made you cry.
You didn't have much money but you gave it anyway.
Jesus took that gift you gave
And that's why I'm in Heaven today"

One by one they came, far as your eyes could see.
Each life somehow touched by your generosity.
Little things that you had done, sacrifices that you made,
They were unnoticed on this earth
In Heaven now proclaimed.

Paul might have concluded his words to the Corinthians by saying, "When you get to heaven, and see the souls that your sacrificing won, you won't be saying, 'Rats, I could have had a steak!'"

Chapter 7. Festus

READ - *Acts 25:1-12*

TEXT - ... *I appeal to Caesar. (Act 25:11b)*

THEME - Even when things seem most confusing, God is still in control.

Introduction

It seems a familiar refrain by now, but once again we see Paul on trial, and defending himself before a court of law. MacArthur, in his study Bible, points out that this is the fourth of six such defenses. The other five are seen in:

- *Acts 22:1-21* - he defended himself before the mob in Jerusalem
- *Acts 22:30-23:10*, the next day he defended himself before the Jewish Sanhedrin
- *Acts 24:10-21*, he defended himself before Felix, the governor, who although convicted by the gospel message, refused it, and unjustly kept Paul imprisoned for 2 years.
- *Act 25:1-12*, in our text, he defends himself before Festus and the Jewish leadership again, and when Festus suggests that he will send Paul back to Jerusalem to face his accusers there, Paul is forced to exercise his right of appeal and appeals to Caesar.
- *Acts 26:1-29*, he defends himself before King Agrippa and Festus.
- *Acts 28:17-29*, the book of *Acts* will close with Paul in Rome, and with a final defense before the Christians there.

In our text this morning, we see him before Festus.

Festus succeeded Felix as the Roman governor. cf. *Acts 24:27*

Felix was not a good governor, and actually was quite corrupt. We learned last time that he was so corrupt, the emperor Nero recalled him to Rome, and were it not for the intercession of his brother, who had some influence with Nero, Felix would have probably been executed for his crimes. The Jewish people despised him, and had complained loudly and bitterly to Rome about his offenses. His injustice was demonstrated against Paul, who, although having demonstrated his innocence before Felix, was nonetheless left in prison for 2 years. (cf. *Acts 24:27*).

By contrast, Porcius Festus was apparently a much more honorable and just man. Most of what we see in his dealings with Paul paints him as basically just and efficient in his role as governor. Notice:

- When he took the reigns of his new post, he went straight to Jerusalem. Although he would govern from Caesarea, as most of the governors did, he knew the center of influence and culture for this region was Jerusalem. He wasted no time (only 3 days) in getting to the heart of his new position, and went to Jerusalem (cf. vs. 1).
- When the Jewish leaders, immediately upon meeting him, clamored for Paul's head (cf. vs. 2) he refused to be pushed around by them and schedule a trial in Jerusalem. He pointed out that Paul was in Caesarea, and he would examine him there. "You can accompany me there in a few days if you like, and bring your case in the proper court there." (cf. vs. 5)
- When he returned to Caesarea, he wasted little time in getting to the bottom of the issue with Paul. He remained in Jerusalem approximately 10 days, returned to Caesarea, and the next day, convened a hearing related to Paul (cf. vs. 6)

- He heard both sides of the case. Luke summarizes the proceedings for us in this instance, not going into detail either about the charges or the defense. The charges were "*many and serious*" as well as being completely baseless and without proof (cf. vs. 7), and Paul's defense was a simple denial. They had no proof of any of their charges, so denial was the only defense he needed. (cf. vs. 8)
- I think at this point Festus may have felt a bit out of his depth. He was not a Jew, and was not particularly knowledgeable about the religious aspects of his new subjects. I imagine he might have thought that he could gain a better understanding of Paul's case by taking it back to Jerusalem and having it argued there. Perhaps more detail would emerge and there would be more expert witnesses available there. It's just conjecture, of course, but that seems a plausible explanation for his request that Paul go to Jerusalem and be tried there. (cf. vs. 9) He knew the danger that would pose for Paul, and even went so far as to assure him that the trial would not be a farce, and that he (Festus) would preside (cf. vs. 9 - "*before me*"). (Or course there was a political motivation for Festus, as well, and we'll see that in a minute.)
- When Paul's response to this suggestion was an exercise of his right of appeal to be tried before Caesar, Festus, perhaps relieved to be rid of this problem, granted the appeal.

In all of these things we see evidence of a governor who, although a politician, was basically a just and efficient and decent ruler.

But is that all we can learn from this passage?

Certainly not. As he brought Paul to the witness stand and examined him, he was seeking facts about him and his case. As we, 2000 years later, look back on this account, we learn some interesting facts from Festus, too:

FACT # 1 - The Bible Is A Reliable Document.

Now, I'll pause for a second to let that first point sink in. Want me to say it again, just so you are sure you heard me correctly? "FACT # 1 - The Bible is a Reliable Document!"

I hear the groans - "What are you talking about, preacher?" "We know you love to take every opportunity to remind us that the Bible is important, and we should love our Bibles and read them, and the Bible is the Word of God, and accurate and infallible and God-breathed. WE GET IT. But how in the world do you get anything related to the reliability of the Bible from this account about Festus??"

Glad you asked. Allow me to explain.

When preparing a message, there is a lot of study that is involved. In addition to reading the text, itself, in both the original Greek and in various translations, is part of it. Another part involves consulting the commentaries that have been written to explain the text. Some of the commentaries I consulted this week include Matthew Henry, Jamieson Faucett and Brown, Abbott, Barnes Notes, The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Rice's commentary on Acts, Bock's commentary on Acts, Marshall's commentary on Acts, and Boice's commentary on Acts. Additionally, I consulted the NIV Study Bible, the MacArthur Study Bible, and the ESV Study Bible. All were helpful and instructive. But it was John R. Rice, who provided this interesting gem:

QUOTE (John R. Rice, Filled With The Spirit, p. 497) - "The key date about which we can be more nearly sure than others in the life of Paul from history is the accession of Festus who replaced Felix (Acts 24:27). Traditionally, that date is taken as either 60 A.D. or 61 A.D. "

Rice goes on to say that based on this highly attested fact of Scripture, along with some simple math, we can come up with a pretty accurate chronology of the life of Paul:

Death, resurrection of Christ - 30 A.D.
Conversion of Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road - 35 A.D. (?)
First visit to Jerusalem (cf. Galatians 1:18) - 37 A.D.
At Tarsus - 37-43 A.D.
Visit to Jerusalem with the offering from Antioch (cf. Acts 11:30) - 44 A.D.
First missionary journey - 46-48 A.D. (?)
Council at Jerusalem - 50 A.D.
Second missionary journey - 51-53 A.D.
Writes 1, 2 Thessalonians - 52 A.D.
Third Missionary journey - 54-58 A.D.
Writes Galatians, 1,2 Corinthians, and Romans - 55-58 A.D.
Arrested in Jerusalem - 58 A.D.
Imprisoned in Caesarea under Felix - 58-60 A.D.
Accession of Festus to the governorship - 60 A.D.
Paul arrives at Rome - 61 A.D.
Writes Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, and Philippians - 61-63 A.D.
Release from first imprisonment - 63 A.D.
Writes 1 Timothy, Titus, possibly Hebrews, and finally 2 Timothy - 64-67 A.D.
Death of Paul - 67 A.D.

Now I don't want to take this too far, but it is worth mentioning. It is a reminder to us of the historical accuracy and the level of detail contained in our Bibles. And it is wonderful! When we compare the details therein with the other historical documents available from antiquity, we are constantly amazed at how accurate the Bible is.

FACT # 1 - The Bible Is A Reliable Document.

There is another interesting tidbit in this passage which reminds us that the Bible is a reliable book. Although we did not read far enough for you to see it, let me draw your attention to *vs. 26, esp. the phrase "my lord"*

Such a little detail might escape notice, except for the fact that Nero, who was now the emperor, was the first of the caesars to allow such a title. His predecessors were all clear that such a title should not be used of them. The simple fact that Luke recorded this detail, and it so accurately reflects the men and government in place at the time, makes me want to rejoice in the accuracy of my Bible.

FACT # 1 - The Bible Is A Reliable Document.

Allow me to remind you, then, of just how wonderful and reliable your Bible is!

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17 NKJV)

... no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke

as they were

moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:20-21 NKJV)

Oh my brother... my sister... how can I convince you of the importance of this book in your life? How can I convince you that no church teachings, no preacher's words, and no denominational rhetoric matters - only what is found in this book, which is the holy, God breathed, and RELIABLE Word of God?

Read it. And when you've read it, READ IT AGAIN. Memorize it. Meditate about it. Every day. Until God calls you home.

By the way, how are you doing on the 61 Day Challenge?

FACT # 2 - The Best Of Men Are Unreliable.

We spent some time in the introduction noticing that Festus was a better judge and a better governor than Felix. We might even conclude, based on what we see here, that he was probably a better MAN than Felix.

But he was still a man.

READ - vs. 9 - *wanting to do the Jews a favor...* Compare that verse with the last verse that described Felix - cf. *Acts 24:27*.

He was apparently somewhat honest and just in his role as governor, and everything about him suggests efficiency and competency, but he was still a politician. He still cared more about popularity and his own personal situation than he did about other things.

Again, I don't want to go too far with this, but it is an interesting application from an interesting man.

QUOTE (Begg) - The best of men are men at best.

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9 KJV)

Apply that truth to other men, and it should make you rejoice over fact # 1 - we don't have to rely on the words of imperfect men - we have the Word of God as our guide!

Apply that truth to yourself, and be reminded of how desperately even the best of us need a Savior.

FACT # 3 - We Can Always Rely On God.

I guess the key verse in this passage has to be vs. 11 - *I appeal to Caesar*. We've been looking at Festus, but the other character in the narrative, the most important character in the narrative, is Paul. And vs. 11 is a key verse because it explains how Paul is going to get to the place he's been trying to get to for years - Rome. He's not going to arrive in Rome as he did in other cities - as a missionary. He's going to arrive in Rome as a prisoner bound for Caesar's court of appeals. But he's going to get there.

QUOTE (Barnes) - "I appeal to Caesar." It was in this mysterious way that Paul's long-cherished desire to see the Roman church, and to preach the gospel there, was to be gratified. Rom 1:9, and Rom 1:10,11. For this he had prayed long, (Rom 1:10, 15:23,24;) and now at length this purpose was to be fulfilled. God answers prayer; but it is often in a way which we little anticipate.

Now we've mentioned this before, but let's consider again just how all this must have looked to Paul. He is not looking backwards through the lens of history and seeing how God worked all these details out to get him to Rome. He is living it... he is in the middle of it... he is sitting in a prison cell chained to Roman guards, and he is being dragged before tribunal after tribunal and defending himself again and again against baseless charges... all the while wondering why God is leaving him to languish in this way when he should be in ROME!

ILLUS - One of my favorite movie lines is from *Amadeus*, when Antonio Salieri cries out in bewilderment, "What was God doing?"

Paul must have felt like that sometimes as he went through these dark days.

When we go through things, we often wonder what God is doing, don't we? We pray for each other on Wednesday evenings. Some of you would be amazed to know how your brothers and sisters pray for you. This past Wednesday we talked about the fact that so many in our midst have gone through serious trials.

As a matter of fact, it seems that there is not a family in our number that has not gone through something difficult, even tragic, in the past year.

But our God is a SOVEREIGN GOD, and that means that even when we don't comprehend what He's doing, HE DOES. God never wonders what's going on? He never falters or fails in His control. He never stumbles or makes a mistake. My God is an awesome God who superintends every circumstance of my life!

So even though it might have looked to the world like poor Paul was defeated and going down for the count... even though they might have seen him there in chains, and being escorted between prison cell and courtroom over and over... YET, GOD WAS IN CONTROL. Every detail was working together to complete God's plan for Paul's life, which was ROME.

Daniel described our sovereign God like this - *Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, For wisdom and might are His. And He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings; He gives wisdom to the wise And knowledge to those who have understanding. He reveals deep and secret things; He knows what is in the darkness, And light dwells with Him. (Daniel 2:20-22 NKJV)*

FACT # 3 - We Can Always Rely On God. He is ALWAYS in control.

And no matter how things might appear, God is working everything out. He did it here, in the life of Paul, and He is doing it now, in your life, as well.

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28 KJV)

We are often tossed and driven
On the restless sea of time.
Somber skies and howling tempests
Oft succeed a bright sunshine.
In that land of perfect day,
When the mists have rolled away,
We will understand it better by and by.

Conclusion

As I looked over my notes in preparing this message, I realized that it was kind of a Howard Hill sermon.

Some of you know one of my hobbies is archery. I like shooting bows, and making bows, and basically everything related to bows and arrows. Fun stuff. Howard Hill was a great archer - some would say one of the greatest who ever lived. He is dead now, but you might have seen his abilities if you ever watched the old Robin Hood movie starring Errol Flynn. The archery feats in that movie were all done by Howard Hill.

I have a book in my library by Howard, and in it he says that any archer who can't hit a bullseye after 3 successive shots can't really call himself an archer. Shot one might miss, but then you adjust your aim and shot 2 gets closer. By shot 3 you've got it figured out and you're dead on. He even described an elk hunt where he shot an elk at 185 yards with a longbow. Shot 1 was over the back. Shot 2 was underneath, but shot 3 - right on.

As I look over our 3 points I see we were narrowing our aim with each shot, and with the 3rd we nailed it.

1. We can trust our Bibles. That is certainly a truth we learn from this passage, but I don't think it's the main truth.
2. We can not trust ourselves. True. But I don't think that truth hits the bullseye, either.

3. We can ALWAYS TRUST GOD. BULLSEYE! That is the key! That is the major truth in this passage. In all that was happening with Paul here... even when he in desperation heard himself cry out "I APPEAL TO CAESAR" God was in control, and Paul was safe in His arms.

I started trying to teach my son to swim early on. It was a chore. A year or so old at the time, the little guy didn't like getting water in his face in the bathtub, much less this massive ocean of a pool he was staring at now. At first, "teaching him to swim" meant getting him to splash around a bit on the top step, and maybe putting his lips in the water enough to blow bubbles if he was feeling really brave.

Eventually I convinced him to walk around with me in the shallow end, with a death-grip around my neck of course. Once we mastered that, it was time for the Big Show - Jumping Off the Side. Fulfilling my God-given duty as a daddy, I lifted him out of the pool, stood him on the side, and said, "Come on, jump!"

I think at that moment, my one-year-old son wrote me off as a crazy man.

The look on his face, in about two seconds, went from confusion to dawning understanding, to amused rejection, to outright contempt. He frowned and said, "No. I go see Mommy." Again acting faithfully on my solemn responsibility as a father, I refused to surrender, chased him down, and eventually convinced him (with various bribes) to come back to the pool.

And so we came to the moment of truth.

I jumped into the water again and stood in front of him with my arms outstretched, watching him bob up and down in his swimmy-diaper as one-year-olds do when they kind of want to jump, but not really. "Come on, kiddo," I said. "I'm right here. I'll catch you. I promise!" He looked at me half skeptically, did one more little wind-up, bouncing at the knees, and then fell into the pool with what was more a flop than a jump.

And I caught him.

After that we were off to the races. "Doot 'gain, Daddy! Doot 'gain!" And so commenced half an hour of jump, catch, lift, reset, jump, catch, lift, reset.

When it was over, my wife and I started to worry that maybe our son had gotten a bit too comfortable with the water. What if he wandered out to the pool when no one was there with him? Would he remember all the times he'd safely jumped into the water and decide he had this pool thing whipped? Would he jump again?

Over the next few days we watched him around the pool, and what we saw both comforted me as a parent and touched me deeply as a father. Never once did my little boy think about jumping into the water - at least not unless I was standing underneath him with my arms out, promising to catch him. And then he would fly!

You see, despite all his apparent successes, my son's trust was never in his own ability to handle the water. It was in his father, and in his father's promise: "Come on kiddo. Jump. I promise I'll catch you."

(Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Gospel?* (Crossway, 2010), pp. 71-72; submitted by Van Morris, Mount Washington, Kentucky)

Chapter 8. How Do We Decide (3)

READ - *1 Corinthians 9:1-27*

TEXT - *Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being. (1 Corinthians 10:24 NKJV)*

THEME - We should prioritize the salvation of the lost, and the edification of the saved, above our own concerns.

Introduction

ILLUS - Tom is wrapping up another long day at the office. His day included a couple of grueling meetings, and a long list of tedious tasks methodically completed and checked off his todo list. He is bushed, and looking forward to seeing the office door swing shut behind him. He reaches for his coat, but just as he begins pulling it on, a colleague, Emily, appears in the door, and with a smile says, "It's been a heck of a day. I'm gonna go have a drink. Join me?" Tom knows his wife and family are expecting him soon. He knows, too, that the office is aware he is a Christian. He also knows that Emily has a bit of a wild reputation. But it's just a harmless little drink, right? And everybody knows he loves his wife, right? What can it possibly hurt?

As Christians we must live in this world, with all its temptations and allurements. We are equipped with the Bible, which is our roadmap and our guide. When the "have a drink with Emily after work" scenarios present themselves, HOW DO WE DECIDE? Some aspects of the scenario seem pretty clear, don't they? Married men have no business spending time with the office flirt. Solomon put it like this, "Can a man take fire into his bosom and not be burned?" But what if it wasn't the office flirt, but rather somebody who has been asking all kinds of questions about Christianity... Somebody who knows you are a believer... Somebody you've even invited to worship with you at church. What then?

HOW DO WE DECIDE?

Well, today we will wrap up our brief talk on that very subject. We have been building a list of principles... A list of questions we can ask and apply to just these types of situations. Let's put the final two questions onto that list.

Does It Help Evangelize?

1 Corinthians 9 is a special passage to me, for it contains the passage from which I preached my very first sermon. It was from this pulpit, and it was when I was a teenager. I'm guessing it was probably about 10 minutes long (which you would all like very much, I suspect), and it was based on *vss. 24-27*. There is some great stuff therein about running the race for Jesus.

There's a lot more than that in this passage, though. There is much to help us in answering our question, "How do we decide on questionable things?" Let's concentrate specifically on *vss. 19-23*. Read it again with me.

I find it interesting that nowhere in this chapter does Paul say, "Here is what you need to do." Nowhere does he provide instruction or commandment. Instead, he says, "Here is what I do." At the start of this chapter in my Bible, the heading "A Pattern of Self-Denial" appears, because this chapter is just that - Paul describing his OWN behavior, and holding that standard of behavior up as an example for us to consider. "How do I decide on questionable things, Paul?" "Well, let me share a little about how I do that."

And, as we would expect from Paul, he brings it all back to the gospel, and the preaching of the gospel. If we look carefully at what he says in *vss. 19-23*, we see that he says his decisions are based on the

impact his actions might have on the salvation of others... on the impact of his actions, either positively or negatively, on getting people saved.

"Paul, is it right for me to do this or that?" "Well, I decide those things based on whether it helps to get others saved, or hinders it." "If the lost see me engaged in that behavior will it encourage them to draw closer to the cross or push them away from it?" "If the former, then I will do it, and enthusiastically. If the latter, then I never do it."

Such was Paul's testimony.

And based on that we have another question to add to our list. We have said, in trying to decide on whether or not a thing is right or wrong for us as Christians, we will apply a little questionnaire to it. We will ask:

1. Is it GOOD?
2. Is it SAFE? (Can it control me?)
3. Is it a RIGHT USE OF MY BODY, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit?
4. Does it OFFEND those weaker in the faith than I?

To this list we now add number 5, which is "Does it help or hinder evangelism?"

Paul's principle was to concentrate on thoughts, words, and actions which attract the lost to Christ, and avoid thoughts words and actions which hinder the success of the gospel.

He returns to this powerful thought at the conclusion of *chapter 10*. Notice *vss. 31-33*

Now, we've been considering these things in light of activities or actions that are "questionable." We know that if a particular behavior or activity is specifically dealt with in the Bible, there is no question about it. "Is it right or wrong for me to live with my boyfriend before I get married to him?" That is not the type of things we're talking about, for the Bible specifically tells us that adultery / fornication are sinful and displeasing to God. Don't do it. "Is it right or wrong for me to cheat on my taxes, Pastor? I can get paid 'under the table' - in cash - and the IRS will never know about it. Is that ok?" "Well, the Bible says pretty clearly 'Thou shalt not steal' and when Jesus was asked about that very behavior, His response was, 'Go and pay our taxes.'"

Of all the questions we have been asking, we must remember the one of first importance that overarches them all - "DOES THE BIBLE ALREADY ADDRESS THE ISSUE?" If the answer to that is 'YES', then we do what the Bible says and stop asking questions.

So we're dealing with the gray areas - the places where the Bible is silent, or unclear.

And Paul gives us his example - *I have become all things to all men that I might by all means save some. (1 Corinthians 9:22 NKJV)*

"Is it right or wrong for a Christian to drink alcoholic beverages? Not talking about DRUNKENESS, for the Bible does clearly condemn that. But what about social drinking - a little bit here and there. The Bible is not as clear about that. After all, John the Baptist was to drink "*neither wine nor strong drink*" (*Luke 1:15 NKJV*) but then just a short time afterwards Jesus' first miracle involved turning water into wine. And Paul would one day tell Timothy to "*drink a little wine for your stomach's sake*" (*1 Timothy 5:23*). So is it right or wrong to drink it?

"What about gambling?" The Bible never mentions gambling in any way but negatively, but it never specifically prohibits the activity, either. So is it right or wrong for a Christian to gamble?

It is this type of question with which we are dealing in these discussions, and perhaps that is what makes Paul's teaching here in *chapter 9* so incredibly powerful. Notice that he DOES NOT use that type of

question as his example. He applies the principle to an activity that is not questionable AT ALL. He applies the principle to an activity that NOBODY DENIES IS PERFECTLY ACCEPTABLE.

Should a minister of the gospel be paid for his efforts at preaching the gospel? That is the question. (cf. vs. 8-14) And Paul's answer is clear - *The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel. (vs. 14)* Later, in speaking with Timothy about the treatment of elders in the local church, Paul would write, *Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. (1 Timothy 5:17 NKJV)* Also - *Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches. (Galatians 6:6 NKJV)* (NOT CLEAR ENOUGH? How about that last one in the NLT - *Those who are taught the word of God should help their teachers by paying them. (Galatians 6:6 NLT)*)

And so, the Bible is CLEAR on the fact that those who teach and preach the word of God should be financially supported by those who they teach. Yet Paul uses that CLEAR thing to explain his principle "I will do nothing that hinders people being saved, and concentrate on those things that helps people be saved."

Basically, then, Paul is saying that "although it is perfectly acceptable for me to do this, I will not do it if it hinders somebody being saved."

What makes Paul's example so powerful is this - If it applies in such a case, how much more in the questionable cases we are considering?

I have become all things to all men that I might by all means save some. (1 Corinthians 9:22 NKJV)

Consider this question - Why are you here, Christian? You got saved and now you have eternal life. As the old gospel song says, "I'm gonna live forever. I'm gonna die, no never."

As another one says:

This world is not my home.
I'm just a passin' through.
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue.
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door and
I can't feel at home in this world anymore.

So why are you here? Why didn't God just snatch you to heaven the minute you got saved? What can possibly happen in your life now that cannot happen BETTER in heaven? Why listen to my preaching when you could sit at the feet of Jesus? Why try to live so as to please Him here, in a sin-shackled body, when you could be serving Him forever there in a glorified and sinless one. WHY ARE WE STILL HERE?

BECAUSE THERE IS A JOB YET TO DO! *All men have not faith.*

READ - *Acts 1:6-9*

He didn't take them with Him then, because He had a job for them to do. The one thing that cannot be done in heaven, and can only be done before we get there, is sharing the gospel with the lost... winning the lost... getting people saved! It is the reason we are still here. It is our task, our commission, our mission, and our very reason for walking about here on this earth.

And Paul said, I won't do anything, questionable or unquestionable, that might negatively impact on that task.

ILLUS - Do you remember when John Stavropulos was with us? Do you remember when he ran that banner down the center aisle containing the hundreds and thousands of unreached people groups in our world?

That's our mission, and we must do nothing that would hinder reaching them.

How many unreached people did you pass on your way to church this morning? How many are living even now in the shadow of this very steeple, and living without the knowledge of Jesus Christ? WE MUST DO NOTHING THAT WOULD HINDER THEIR HEARING, as well as doing EVERYTHING TO HELP their hearing. We must do everything we can to win them.

ILLUS - Not long after we moved into our first house in California, my wife, Janie, and I picked up on the tension between a couple of neighbors. One was a very outspoken churchgoer, while the other was an unbeliever. I knew I was in the hot seat when the unchurched man struck up a conversation with me as we were both working in our yards.

"Say, Steve, aren't you a pastor?" It seems implicit in the public's understanding that pastors exist to serve as referees in times of conflict, so I reluctantly listened as this troubled man opened up about the neighbor he'd never understood. He unfolded a long history of numerous conflicts over small issues.

Then he looked up and sighed, "But the most recent problem takes the cake. We received a letter from his attorney threatening to sue us if we don't trim a tree that borders his yard. It seems strange he didn't just come over and ask me to take care of the tree before he went to his attorney."

With a little wink this streetwise unchurched man continued, "You know, I was getting ready to trim that tree, but now there's no way I'm going to do anything until he forces me. I will gladly go to court just so I can have a story to tell about being sued by Christians over an orange tree." He summarized his thoughts with a haunting observation: "I guess sometimes Christians love us - they just don't like us."

(Steve Sjogren, *Changing the World Through Kindness* (Regal, 2005), pp. 103-104)

I shared that because it illustrates how we often put trivial, even nonsensical things ahead of the souls of men and women. What is more important, a neighbor's soul, or an orange tree? I submit that many of the "questionable things" we struggle with are no more important than an orange tree.

Paul was willing to give up ANYTHING for his lost neighbors.

I have become all things to all men that I might by all means save some. (1 Corinthians 9:22 NKJV)

I please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many; that they may be saved. (1 Corinthians 10:33 NKJV)

Does It Build Up Other Christians?

Well, let's conclude this study with one last principle.

READ *1 Corinthians 10:23-24*

This one is similar to the last, but concerns not lost souls, but saved brothers and sisters. We could state the principal like this - "I will only engage in things that build other believers up in their faith, and I will strive to never do things which might hurt, hinder, or tear them down in their walk with God."

This was something Paul spoke of at other times, too:

Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. (Romans 15:2-3 NKJV)

... we do all things, beloved, for your edification. (2 Corinthians 12:19 NKJV)

The basic principal is the same as the previous point, so we won't belabor it. It goes back to the idea that everything we do is for others, doesn't it? Everything! OTHERS are why we are here.

Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being. (1 Corinthians 10:24 NKJV)

Conclusion

So there you have it. I hope this little study is helpful. I hope that the next time you are presented with a dilemma about Christian behavior - what is right and what is wrong - should I do this thing or not - would Christ be pleased with it? I hope that when you come across such stumbling blocks in your daily walk - questions that you cannot find clear answers about in the Bible, you will ask these 6 questions:

1. Is it GOOD? (*All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. (1 Corinthians 6:12 NKJV)*)
2. Is it SAFE? (*All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any. (1 Corinthians 6:12 NKJV)*)
3. Is it a RIGHT USE OF MY BODY? (*Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit? (1 Corinthians 6:19 NKJV)*)
4. Could it OFFEND those weaker in the faith than I? (*Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. (1 Corinthians 8:13 NKJV)*)
5. Does it help EVANGELIZE? (*I please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved. (1 Corinthians 10:33 NKJV)*)
6. Does it BUILD UP other believers? (*All things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. (1 Corinthians 10:23 NKJV)*)

Let us pray.

Chapter 9. Almost Persuaded

READ - *Acts 25:13-26:32*

TEXT - *Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian." (Acts 26:28 NKJV)*

THEME - There is only one saving response to the gospel - acceptance.

Introduction

Several weeks ago, we were in *Acts 22* and we saw something similar happening there. There, as here, Paul was standing and giving his testimony. There, he was standing on a staircase witnessing to the angry mob that had tried to kill him just a few moments prior, and here he is standing chained between guards, witnessing to a governor and a king.

When we looked at *Acts 22*, we made mention of how Paul's approach was to simply give his testimony. And here, as he stands not before a crowd of his peers, but before the rulers of his world, he falls back on the same exact thing - he gives his testimony. And it is the same testimony he shared in *chapter 22* - the same three points:

1. I was just like you. (cf. *Acts 25:5,9*)
2. Then I met Jesus. (cf. *Acts 25:12-13*)
3. Jesus changed my life. (cf. *Acts 25:19-20*)

We learned, in that earlier message, that all believers have a similar testimony. Oh, the details will differ from Christian to Christian, I'm sure. None of us in this room will be able to say that we were blinded by the light on the road to Damascus, as Paul was. But all of us have the same key aspects to our testimony, or we don't have one - I was lost, then I met Jesus, and now I am saved - now my life has been changed. Oh, and by the way - I don't remember how much time we spent on that third point, but it is vital. It seems that recently the Lord has been dealing with me about this very thing.

ILLUS - Friday night some of us attended the Booth Brothers concert at Hartville Kitchen (and thanks to Sandy Gentili for organizing that for us). I so appreciated that Michael Booth gave a gospel presentation at the conclusion of the concert, and even an invitation. So many gospel musicians are just entertainers. How nice to see a group that understands music is just a tool to draw people to Christ! Michael gave an illustration that I found interesting. He asked us to imagine that we had arrived at the concert, but the Booth Bros were not there. Twenty minutes after the concert was to start they strolled in, and apologized for their tardiness by pointing out that they had had a little trouble on their way to the concert - they had been hit by a Mack Truck and dragged 200 yards down the road. He pointed out that upon hearing this our eyes would have no doubt flickered over their flawlessly pressed suits and shined shoes, and our minds would have registered disbelief. After all, if something as monstrous as a Mack Truck had hit a mere human being, his clothes would at least be torn! There would be some evidence to back it up, wouldn't there? And if the God of the universe, the creator of all, the One who is bigger than all else combined, has taken up residence in our life, will there not be some evidence?

Yes - all of us have the same testimony - I was lost, I met Jesus, and Now I am changed - or we have no testimony at all.

We learned, also, in that earlier message, that our testimony is powerful. *Acts 22:22 - they listened to him.* We learned that people will listen to you who will NEVER listen to a preacher. there are people who will hear your testimony even when they tune all else out. YOUR TESTIMONY IS POWERFUL.

Well, all those points could be made again from Paul's presentation here. Amazingly, Paul knew its power, and he therefore used it on all - rich and poor, weak and powerful. What had been the truth for a mob of

Jews in *chapter 22* was just as much the truth for the rich and powerful and elite assembled before him now. Kings need the same gospel as everybody else.

Now, this morning, that's all I want to say about Paul's testimony. I want to move from it to the reactions of his hearers, where I believe we will find God's message for us today. There are three main hearers described in our text - three different people and three somewhat different reactions to the gospel. They are the same reactions many people exhibit today when they hear the good news of Jesus Christ, or when we try to tell them about what Jesus has done for us. Some people react like Festus... some like Bernice... and some like King Agrippa.

Festus

We spent a lot of time in our last message making the point that Festus was a much better governor than Felix, his predecessor. We spoke of his apparent justice and efficiency in the role. We spoke of how he handled Paul's case with great dispatch and seriousness. In all things the account we have seems to describe him in favorable terms.

We kind of came away thinking that, as politicians go, Festus was a pretty decent fellow... maybe even a good man.

But being a GOOD MAN does NOT mean he was a SAVED man, does it?

As a matter of fact, we have conclusive evidence that he was an unbeliever... lost... unsaved.

1. Festus did not believe Jesus to be alive - and such is a requirement of the saved

cf. *Acts 25:19*

Romans 10:9-10 - if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

2. Festus thought Paul was nuts.

cf. *Acts 26:24*

His reaction to the gospel, then, was RIDICULE.

Have you ever shared your faith with someone and received a similar response? YOU ARE OUT OF YOUR MIND. YOU ARE A RELIGIOUS NUT... A FANATIC... YOU ARE DELUSIONAL. It's a quite common response to the gospel. I find that while there are some who will actually utter the thought in words, there are far more who will just look at you with an expression that says, "You poor deluded soul, how can you be so out there?"

Yes, it is a common response. Perhaps even your response! If so, may I share an observation.

BEING GOOD DOES YOU NO GOOD!

And if Festus died with that mindset... if Festus never came to understand his need for the savior he ridiculed here, then Festus died lost.

Bernice

We can't go too far with Bernice, for the Holy Spirit has not given us much about her in the pages of Scripture. Other sources outside the Bible help us, but those are not the same as the Bible, and so we can't build doctrine on them. But we know a few things.

One source I consulted says of Bernice that she had been married twice before she moved in with her brother. Bernice and King Agrippa were brother and sister, apparently living in an incestuous relationship. Later on she was to become the mistress of a couple of Roman emperors.

I guess Bernice is just an example of a worldly person.

Sometimes a person can become so blinded by sin that the gospel has a hard time getting through. Not an impossible time, but a hard time.

ILLUS - Dr. Tom Malone used to preach a sermon called "How To Get A Hard Case Saved." One of the points he made in that sermon was "there is no such thing as a hard case. In other words, no matter who you are, and no matter what is in your life, God can save you if you will allow Him to.

But the more dirt we throw on a fire, the less flame remains.

Our culture gets more sinful by the day, and the more of that we immerse ourselves in, the more it drowns out the gospel. The less we are able to hear the good news.

ILLUS - Yesterday, I was talking with Sister Joyce at the Haven of Rest. She was talking about the story that's been in the news lately about the BYU student who was expelled for sex outside of marriage, and she was dismayed that such a thing would be ridiculed in the media. And then she pointed out the worst part of the whole thing - Christians and churches are jumping on the band wagon to criticize the school for dealing with this sin. CHRISTIANS!!!! How have we fallen so far in American Christianity that what the Bible clearly defines as sin is DEFENDED?

Yes, the more dirt we throw on a fire, the less flame remains. And we can even put out a fire by throwing enough dirt on it. Perhaps Bernice is a reminder of this. Notice her response.

"What response it that, pastor?"

"Well... let me show you... let's see... in *Acts 25:23* she comes in... and then... let's see... in *Acts 26:30* she gets up and walks out. Hmm... that's it?"

Actually, it's not there, is it? There is no response recorded for Bernice. She appears to have been unmoved... unaffected... and unsaved as a result. All we know is that she came in, was in the room when Paul spoke, and then walked back out - unchanged.

ILLUS - I think, interestingly, that Paul himself may be one of the great examples of being so blinded by sin that we cannot see... the sound of our sinful choices drowns out the sound of the gospel. When Jesus finally got his attention on the Damascus Road, He said *Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads. (Acts 26:14 NKJV)* Jesus had been prodding him... goading him... convicting him of his need to be saved for, apparently, some time, and Paul had been oblivious to it, so blinded was he by the other things going on in his life at the time.

If you have not yet listened to the gospel... if you find yourself so blinded and deafened by the sin of this world and the sin of your own lifestyle choices, it is not too late for you (although the hour is very very late). You MUST LISTEN and you MUST RESPOND to the good news Jesus has for you. Don't just get up and walk out as Bernice did - UNCHANGED... UNSAVED... LOST!

Agrippa

Finally, we come to the response of Agrippa. Let's read it again:

READ - *Acts 26:27-30*

Some of you were probably puzzled as I read that, for the Bible in your lap says something somewhat different. Where the King James Version says, "*Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian*" and the New King James says, "*You almost persuade me to become a Christian*", some translations, such as the NIV, have "*Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?*" (*Acts 26:28 NIV*)

The reason for the disparity is that there is genuine disagreement among Bible scholars as to which is the correct translation of the original Greek in this case. And there are strong arguments in favor of both. I'll always be a King James man, and therefore I come down in favor of that translation. Paul's pressing home the attack in the following verse favors the view that Agrippa was close - almost persuaded, not the view that Agrippa was miles away, ridiculing the very idea.

I love this picture of Paul. Can you see him standing there, chains around his wrists, manacled between guards, arms outstretched in supplication to Agrippa and pleading, "I WOULD TO GOD that you would not stop at ALMOST, Agrippa. *I WOULD TO GOD that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both ALMOST and ALTOGETHER such as I am (i.e. a Christian), except for these chains.* (*Acts 26:29 NKJV*)

He is supposed to be on trial for HIS life... but he wastes no time on trying to save that - his only concern is the souls in the room with him. He pulls out all the stops and throws himself fully into trying to win King Agrippa, and Festus, and Bernice, and the multitude of others in the room, to the Savior.

We see his heart in the anguished cry of *verse 29* We also see it in the invitation of *verse 27* - *Do you believe?* It's the same question we ask in every one of our invitations here. It is the same question you must answer if you ever want to see heaven. DO YOU BELIEVE?

I like how one pastor described Paul's invitation -

QUOTE (Chuck Smith) - This is known as the presumptive close. You know, you show them the various colors that they can buy these towels in. They have all these lovely shades of color. Now the presumptive close, you say, "Now, let's see, which color did you want to order?" You know, you don't say, "Do you want to buy these towels?" You presume they're going to buy and you say, "Which color now did you want, or which color did you like? Oh, the purple. Alright. How many of those did you want?" Paul is using this presumptive close. "Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? Oh, I know you believe the prophets."

ILLUS - I learned some years ago just how powerful that "presumptive close" can be. Beth and I used to have Great Dane dogs. We've owned a couple and they were wonderful members of our family. A couple years ago we saw an ad in the paper for Great Dane puppies. We had taken a blood oath many years before that our Great Dane days were over. We now have a Bassett Hound that is in the twilight of her life and we remind ourselves almost every day that she is the last dog... no more. Well, we decided to go see those little Great Dane pups... just for old time's sake... just for fun... having no inkling of buying one... just wanted to hold them and play with them a bit. We arrived to a room full of beautiful, adorable, cuddly little pups and we rolled around on the floor with them a bit. Beth asked the owner, "Why do they all have different colored collars?" She replied that when a buyer chose their puppy, she gave them a matching collar to take home, so when the puppies were ready to be picked up, you could be sure you were getting the one you had chosen. THEN SHE SAID, "And which color would you like to take with you?" AND THEN I WATCHED IN AMAZEMENT as Beth proceeded to make a selection!!!

So... Paul presses home the invitation, and Paul pulls out all the stops to try and persuade Agrippa to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. After Agrippa's response in vs. 28, Paul does not back off, as he might do if Agrippa was blatantly rejecting the invitation, but he rather presses it home and pleads for his soul. That favors the KJV interpretation.

But it doesn't matter which is correct. The key thought is the same either way. And that key thought is in the word "persuaded." Whether Agrippa was under deep conviction and close to salvation (as I believe, and as the King James says), or whether he was far from it and perhaps even making fun of Paul (as the NIV says), he was NOT PERSUADED.

And no matter how close you come to it, if you aren't PERSUADED OF IT, you will die lost, just as I think Agrippa did.

QUOTE - Almost only counts in horse shoes and hand grenades.

Almost doesn't count when it comes to your soul.

ILLUS - Hymn writer P.P. Bliss was listening to Rev. M. Brundage preach one day. Brother Brundage ended his sermon with the words "He who is almost persuaded is almost saved, and to be almost saved is to be entirely lost." That thought so impressed Bliss that he wrote the hymn we sing so often, and which I hope we will sing in closing today -

"Almost persuaded" now to believe;
"Almost persuaded" Christ to receive;
Seems now some soul to say,
"Go, Spirit, go Thy way,
Some more convenient day
On Thee I'll call."

"Almost persuaded," harvest is past!
"Almost persuaded," doom comes at last!
"Almost" cannot avail;
"Almost" is but to fail!
Sad, sad, that bitter wail—
"Almost," but lost!

Conclusion

And so - just as when we saw give his testimony in *chapter 22*, these people heard it - they listened to him. Festus, Bernice, and Agrippa - they all listened to him. And they all responded to him.

Festus - ridiculed. Bernice - displayed apathy and rock hardness. Agrippa - perhaps under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, at the last second closed the door and walked away.

There is a fourth response that is not seen here - it is the response Paul so desperately wanted to see from his hearers - acceptance. If you are hearing this message today, it is the only right response there is.

Now, if Festus died with the same response in his heart that he had here, we will not see Festus in heaven, for he died lost. And if Bernice was never able to come to a place of turning from her sin and turning to the Savior, we won't see her, either. Even King Agrippa, who may have been so very close - if he stayed there - if he remained "almost" persuaded - well, then he split hell wide open when he died and is there right now.

Those are all common responses. MOST respond this way. Jesus said ... *wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat. (Matthew 7:13 KJV)*

BUT, there is a fourth response that is not seen in our text - it is the response Paul so desperately wanted to see from his hearers - ACCEPTANCE. If you are hearing this message today, know this - it is the only right response - the only one that will get you to heaven.

(KJV) John 1:12 But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:

(KJV) John 5:24 Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

That is the ONLY RESPONSE that will save your soul.

Which response is yours today? If you are a Festus, or an Agrippa, or a Bernice, I wish I had the eloquence of Paul to please with you before it's too late. I WOULD TO GOD that you would accept His gift of salvation today. I WOULD TO GOD that you would not stop at ALMOST.

Chapter 10. Roots Down - Deepening Relationships With One Another

READ - *Philippians 1:27-2:11*

TEXT - *Philippians 2:2 fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.*

THEME - We deepen our relationships with each other when we value others more than ourselves, and when we value togetherness more than solitude.

Introduction:

Here is one of those passages that we approach with awe. There is so much here. We could spend a lifetime trying to understand all that it teaches about our Lord Jesus Christ, and yet if we lived to Methuselah's old age, we would never plumb the depths of it.

1. READ - *Philippians 2:5-8*

That passage is one of the most concise statements on the incarnation of Christ found in the Bible. It refers to the KENOSIS - the emptying of Christ for you and I. It is deep and marvelous and mind-blowing stuff.

But that's not our subject for today.

2. READ - *Philippians 2:9-11*

Here is another wonderful and overriding truth in this passage - Jesus IS the King. Good to remember today in light of the things happening in the world.

ILLUS - Massive earthquake in Japan followed by tsunami that reached around the world. Global warming crowd is already piping in with their interpretation - we did it. But the truth is, it reminds us, doesn't it, that God remains in control, and we remain totally helpless in light of His sovereignty.

ILLUS - Middle East, despite decades of diplomatic and non-diplomatic effort continues to progress toward the conflict the Bible has predicted all along. God has a plan... has documented that plan for us in the Bible... and continues to work it out!

Yes - Jesus is the King, and soon... very soon... that will be demonstrated when everyone in this room, and everyone in this world, and even everyone who has ever lived but is now dead, will BOW to the King.

But that's not our subject for today.

3. READ - *Philippians 2:2-4*

THAT'S our subject for today.

We have been spending some time this year developing the theme ROOTS DOWN, FRUIT UP. If you're new with us today, allow me to explain that a bit. (*Isaiah 37:31 And the remnant who have escaped of the house of Judah shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward.*) We are using the last part of that verse as our theme for 2011 - we are learning how to dig deeper in our relationship with God and in our relationships with each other... put ROOTS DOWNWARD into God and God's Word, and God's

church and God's people. And we are trusting Him to enable us, as we put ROOTS DOWN to bear FRUIT UP. The deeper we go in our relationships with Him and each other, the more fruit we believe we will see for His kingdom.

Basically, the idea of putting ROOTS DOWN could be stated as DEEPENING OUR RELATIONSHIPS... first with God... secondly with one another.

I'd like for us to consider how this passage gives us some insight into the second half of that ROOTS-DOWN equation - how can we deepen relationships with one another?

A few suggestions can be seen in these verses. Bear with me as I share a bit of technical information with you, and then we'll make some application.

Deeper relationships with each other requires a single mind

being like-minded (vs. 2)

DEFINITION - PHRONEO - (LKGNT - to think, to hold an opinion, to have thoughts or an attitude, to be minded or disposed. The pres. tense implies a continual habitual attitude.)

John MacArthur says this word basically means to "think the same way."

Single-mindedness is mentioned throughout our Bibles:

Philippians 3:15-16 - Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.

Philippians 4:2 I implore Euodia and I implore Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.

1 Peter 3:8 Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous

Romans 15:5 Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus.

1 Corinthians 1:10 Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgement.

2 Corinthians 13:10 Finally, brethren, farewell. Become complete. Be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

Deeper relationships with each other requires a single heart

... having the same love... (vs. 2)

DEFINITION - AGAPE - we've discussed this before. It is one of several Greek words translated "love" in our English Bible. It is a uniquely Christian word and refers to the totally unselfish love that marks the believer. It is a love that expects nothing in return. It is a love that is best demonstrated by the self-sacrificing love of the Savior.

QUOTE (MacArthur) - Believers are to love others in the body of Christ equally - not because they are all equally attractive, but by showing the same kind of sacrificial, loving service to all that was shown to them by Christ

John 15:10-12 If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love. These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full. This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.

Romans 12:10 Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another.

Deeper relationships with each other requires a single soul

... of one accord... (vs. 2)

DEFINITION - SYMPSYCHOS; (STRONGS - co-spirited, i.e. similar in sentiment: - like-minded.) (LKGNT - harmonious, united in spirit) (MacArthur - This may also be translated 'united in spirit' and perhaps is a term specially coined by Paul. It lit. means 'one-souled' and describes people who are knit together in harmony; having the same desires, passions, and ambitions.)

I love the picture - 'one-souled'.

Psalms 133:1 Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!

We see pictures of this in the early church. We've learned about it in our studies in Acts.

Acts 4:32 And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common.

Colossians 2:2 That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love,

I like the way Paul described it in that verse - KNIT TOGETHER in love. One-souled.

Acts 2:46-47 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.

By the way, did you notice how that verse shows both sides of our ROOTS-DOWN, FRUIT-UP equation. As their relationships with one another deepened... as they became more and more "one-souled," the Lord added to the church! As they put ROOTS-DOWN, God gave FRUIT-UP.

Deeper relationships with each other requires a single focus.

... of one mind. (vs. 2)

Slightly different than the single mindedness mentioned at the beginning of the verse.

(MacArthur - "Intent on one purpose" is an alternative translation.)

Deeper relationships with each other requires the banishment of self.

1. *Let nothing be done through selfish ambition... (vs. 3)*

DEFINITION - ERITHEIA; (STRONGS - intrigue, i.e. (by implication) faction: - contention(-ious), strife.)

DEFINITION - (LKGNT - The word... denoted a self-seeking pursuit of political office by unfair means. It came to be used of "party squabbles," of the jockeying for position and the intriguing for place and power. It meant "selfish ambition," the ambition which has no conception of service and whose only aims are profit and power.)

DEFINITION - (JFB - "factious intrigue," "self-seeking,")

ILLUS - When evangelist Billy Graham was in the prime of fame and influence, author Gordon MacDonald was an unknown student in seminary. Yet one day MacDonald got the opportunity to meet the famous preacher, and through the experience he learned something about treating others with respect. MacDonald writes:

When I was a seminary student, I had my first chance to meet Mr. Graham personally. "Billy, I'd like you to meet Gordon MacDonald," my introducer said.

I was a 24-year-old, scrawny, somewhat unpromising kid, struggling to pass basic seminary courses, and I was one of many being introduced to Billy Graham. What do I remember about that moment? That he fixed his piercing eyes upon me, extended his hand and said, "Mr. MacDonald, it's an honor to meet you." Mr. MacDonald! He addressed me as if I were a peer or someone "superior" to him. Oh, the dignity of the moment for me. For the space of about - I'm guessing - ten seconds, he connected with me and it seemed as if the two of us were the only people in the room. For weeks I bathed in that awesome moment in which this extraordinary man poured value into me. Such a tiny encounter: such an unforgettable moment.

Gordon MacDonald, "An Evening to Remember," LeadershipJournal.net (posted 5-24-10)

2. *... or conceit... (vs. 3)*

DEFINITION - KENODOXIA - (STRONGS - empty glorying, i.e. self-conceit: - vain-glory.)

DEFINITION - (LKGNT - It refers to personal vanity.)

DEFINITION - (MacArthur - Lit. "empty glory," and often translated "empty conceit." This word refers to the pursuit of personal glory, which is the motivation for selfish ambition.)

QUOTE (Warren Weirsbe) - "There can be no joy in the life of the Christian who puts himself above others."

Deeper relationships with each other requires an adjustment to the sites.

1. ... *with lowliness of mind...* (vs. 3)

DEFINITION - tapeinophrosyne; - (LKGNT - lowly thinking, humility. The word indicates the recognition of personal insufficiency of one's self but the powerful sufficiency of God.)

The man or woman exhibiting lowliness of mind realizes that without God, they are nothing. It is a recognition of our entire and total dependence upon God. All that we have and are is from Him, and nothing is due to our own sufficiency or ability.

2. ... *let each esteem others better than themselves...* (vs. 3)

DEFINITION - (JFB - Instead of fixing your eyes on those points in which you excel, fix them on those in which your neighbor excels you: this is true "humility.")

QUOTE (MacArthur) - The basic definition of true humility.

3. *Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.* (vs. 4)

DEFINITION - "look out" - skopeo; (from which we get our English word SCOPE, as in microscope, telescope, etc.)

DEFINITION - (STRONGS - to take aim at (spy)

ILLUS - Most people haven't heard of the pro football running back named Tony Richardson. That's because his primary role involves helping other running backs succeed: he blocks so they can run. Over the span of seventeen pro football seasons, teams have often paired Richardson with some of the best backs in pro football. In 2001 he was slated to be the main running back, but instead he went to his teammate Priest Holmes and told him, "It's time for me to step out of the way. You need to be getting the ball. And I'm going to do everything I can to help you." Holmes went on to lead the league in rushing, but Richardson never grew envious or resentful. As Holmes would report, "He used to call me up and say, "I just saw you on SportsCenter! He was happier for me than I was for myself." All of the running backs that Richardson helped succeed contend that his influence went beyond blocking for them. He would constantly talk to them through the game, advising, pushing, encouraging, and inspiring them. In a recent interview, Tony Richardson said, "I can't explain it, but it just means more to me to help someone else achieve glory. There's something about it that feels right to me."

Joe Posnanski, "Made to Last," Sports Illustrated (August 23, 2010), pp. 49-51

Conclusion:

So, there you have it. If we want to build deeper relationships with one another, then the FBC team will work on having a single mind, a single heart and a single soul. We will banish from our midst every vestige of selfishness and selfish ambition, and we will set out sites not on our own interests, but always and ever on the needs and interests of the other members of the team.

All good. Let's agree together to do it!

But if you're like me, you may be wondering at the practicality of it. What does it look like? I find myself asking that question more and more in my study of the Bible. When I see a particular set of instructions from God to me in my Bible, I find myself asking the question, "What would that LOOK LIKE in my life?" "What would it look like in the daily workings of a local church... THIS local church?"

Let me share just a couple of ideas of what it would LOOK LIKE.

1. We would be praying together.

Have you tried our midweek prayer meeting yet?

ILLUS - Five young college students were spending a Sunday in London, so they went to hear the famed C.H. Spurgeon preach. While waiting for the doors to open, the students were greeted by a man who asked, "Gentlemen, let me show you around. Would you like to see the heating plant of this church?" They were not particularly interested, for it was a hot day in July. But they didn't want to offend the stranger, so they consented. The young men were taken down a stairway, a door was quietly opened, and their guide whispered, "This is our heating plant." Surprised, the students saw 700 people bowed in prayer, seeking a blessing on the service that was soon to begin in the auditorium above. Softly closing the door, the gentleman then introduced himself. It was none other than Charles Spurgeon. (Author Unknown - Our Daily Bread, April 24.)

Nothing else we do is as important... I am convinced of that. No sermon I can preach is as important as the prayers that empower it.

QUOTE - "For a meaningful preaching event, you need an expectant praying preacher, and you need an expectant praying congregation." (Alistair Begg)

2. We would be working together.

I have watched the blossoming and growth of our ladies ministries with joy. You ladies actually seem to be enjoying your walk with God as you spend so much time together. And I've noticed what a massive place SERVICE holds in that equation. Have the rest of you noticed it?

This coming Monday some ladies will serve together as they provide a meal for the Warner family. The caregivers ministry, which has just recently been started by some of our ladies, is already bringing wonderful results from outside our church, as well as strengthening and building relationships within.

Spring cleaning day is coming up in April. As we work together, side by side, relationships are strengthened. One-ness is built. Striving together toward a common goal is a wonderful thing. We are prayerfully working toward remodeling the auditorium. Such projects give us the opportunity to WORK... to SERVE... to SERVE TOGETHER.

3. We would be playing together.

Game night last night - what a blast. It's that time of year when all kinds of opportunities for playing together present themselves. Softball... golf... campfire fellowships... teen activities. Avail yourselves of the opportunities to get to know one another and have fun together.

4. We would be rejoicing together.

Have you ever been driving down the road and heard something hilarious on the radio? Perhaps you even laughed out loud? When such a thing happens, do you notice that something is missing? It's just hollow to not have anybody to share our laughter with... our joy... our successes... our rejoicing.

Perhaps this is just a restatement of the previous - playing together. But we need it... we need to rejoice TOGETHER.

5. We would be weeping together.

Our brother Sam Warner went home to be with the Lord this past week. There is weeping in that home. And when such times of weeping come, all of us should share in it.

I guess we could just sum it up with the word TOGETHER. We would BE TOGETHER. None of us can succeed any other way. We ALL need the group... the community... the TOGETHERNESS. God said in the earliest pages of the Book, *It is not good for the man to be alone.*

And yet, in our culture, we are drifting farther apart and spending more and more time alone.

ILLUS - Some stats I found - The average American watches TV for nearly 30 hours per week. That's 65 days of nonstop TV watching every year. By the time they graduate from high school, students will have viewed 360,000 commercials. The average 65 year old will have watched two million commercials. The average man spends 11 years of his life watching TV.

I was stunned when I read that last stat. ELEVEN YEARS!!! And that's just TV. Imagine if we factored in time playing on iPhones, or playing video games, or surfing the internet, or doing any of the other things that modern technology has placed in our path to keep us away from others, and alone.

Oh church, let us challenge one another this morning. Let us learn to pray together, and learn together, and work together, and play together. Let us rejoice together and weep together. Let us BE TOGETHER. In so doing, I think we will find ourselves living out the difficult standards described for us in our text.

ILLUS - In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell tells the strange story of Christopher Langan, a genius with a staggering IQ of 195. (For some perspective, Einstein's IQ was 150). During high school, Langan could ace any foreign language test by skimming the textbook 2-3 minutes before the exam. He got a perfect score on his SAT, even though at one point he fell asleep. But Langan failed to use his exceptional gifts and ended up working on a horse farm in rural Missouri. According to Gladwell, Langan never had a community to help him capitalize on his gifts.

Gladwell summarizes the story of Langan in one sentence: "Langan had to make his way alone, and no one - not rock stars, not professional athletes, not software billionaires, and not even geniuses - ever makes it alone."

(Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers* (Little, Brown and Company, 2008), p. 115)

So that's the challenge, brothers and sisters. We deepen our relationships with each other when we value others more than ourselves, and when we value togetherness more than solitude.

Philippians 2:2-4 fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

I love the way Eugene Petersen paraphrased those verses:

Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand. (Philippians 2:2-4, The Message)

Oh church, if we will strive to live those truths, we will, indeed put ROOTS DOWN, and God will help us bear FRUIT UP.

Chapter 11. Bon Voyage

READ - Acts 27:1-44

TEXT - *Therefore take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me. (Acts 27:25 NKJV)*

THEME - We can trust God, even in the most hopeless of storms.

Introduction:

This morning was to have been a big send-off for our brother Nick, our navy man who was being deployed to Afghanistan. However, his deployment was postponed, and so was the send off. I sense competing emotions in Nick and the family. On the one hand there is certainly relief. I know I'm relieved that he won't be put in harm's way right now. On the other hand, there seems a certain level of disappointment - having spent so much time in preparation and readiness, having come to grips with the emotion of it all, only to have it stopped at the last minute. There is, after all, something in a sailor that wants to be at sea... something in a soldier that wants to be in the action. And so, let me say to Nick and his family this morning, we honor your heart my brother, whether your orders are to go or stay. King David wanted to build a temple to the honor of God, but that was not God's plan. Nonetheless, in *1 Kings 8:18, 2 Chronicles 6:8* God said to David, *you did well that it was in your heart.* I thank God for men and women who have it in their heart to fight for me... for all of us. They are fighting this morning in Iraq and Afghanistan, and now suddenly, in Libya. They are risking their lives to save others in Japan. I thank God for you Nick, and for all your brothers and sisters in arms this morning.

And I find it interesting that on this day when our minds are at sea, that we should come to *Acts 27* and the story of Paul's great shipwreck at sea.

Here we have one of the most exciting stories told in all of the Bible. Oh there are some others that come pretty close.

ILLUS - God enabling David to slay Goliath with a stone and sling is pretty exciting stuff.

ILLUS - The miraculous deliverance of Daniel from the den of lions, or the deliverance of the three Hebrew children from the burning fiery furnace - pretty exciting stuff.

ILLUS - God's amazing deliverance of Israel by parting the Red Sea and defeating the Egyptian empire - pretty exciting stuff.

ILLUS - Gideon, leading a ragtag army of 300 men armed only with pitchers and lamps against the Midianite army, and winning the day - amazing.

But for sheer heart pounding action, I think this one is tops. And not only does it tell a great story of a literal storm at sea, and all that went into 276 men surviving that storm, it also provides wonderful instruction to you and I as we face the various storms of life.

Allow me to make just a few observations:

When the south wind blew softly. (vs. 13)

Just when things looked good... just when it seemed everything was working out... just when the wind looked favorable, and success seemed probable... THEN, the storm came (vs. 14).

Now you'll remember that we left Paul with Agrippa and Festus. They were ready to release him, having seen nothing in the prosecutions' case to warrant his imprisonment. But Paul had already made his appeal

to Caesar, and their hands were tied. He must be sent to Rome and continue his defense there. And so, this part of the drama begins with Paul and his party boarding the first of two ships. The first, a ship of Adramyttium (vs. 2) on which he sails from Caesarea to Myra, a city of Lycia (vs. 5), passing by Sidon, Cyprus, Cilicia and Pamphylia. The second ship is boarded at Myra. It is an Alexandrian ship bound for Italy - probably a much larger ship (it must have been pretty big to accommodate 276 people, cf. vs. 37), and probably a merchant ship bearing wheat from Egypt to Rome.

This was not the time of year for sailing, though. Winter was coming on. Sailing was treacherous. Most boats were harbored and left until the weather improved. And when that soft south wind blew up, they jumped at the chance to sail.

It is a picture, isn't it, of how often hard times come into our lives just when things are looking good.

ILLUS - When life is calm, and hope is high, a tiny pain sends you to the doctor... and suddenly you find yourself admitted... tests... procedures... cancer...

ILLUS - That raise you received gave you the final push to buy your dream house... closing... moving day... then the meeting with your boss... cutbacks... downsizing... foreclosure...

There is no promise, Christian, of protection from storms. On the contrary, the Bible clearly teaches over and over that we should expect them... prepare for them.

Acts 14:22 Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.

If the south wind is blowing softly today, thank the Lord for it, but don't expect it to always be so. Euroclydon may be coming! Use the time of calm to prepare for the possibility of storm.

All hope was given up. (vs. 20)

There are storms that are so terrible they seem hopeless.

ILLUS - The people of northern Japan could relate, this morning. Have you seen the pictures of the devastation that occurred there? The storm is so near hopeless that at least 50 souls have given and are giving their lives in that dying nuclear power plant, trying to prevent thousands of others being infected with radiation poisoning.

The wind was fierce, making the ship uncontrollable - vs. 15

The damage to the ship was mounting - they came close to losing the skiff, which was apparently filling with water (hence the difficulty in getting it on board, vs. 16). The hull was coming apart under the stress of the wind and waves, hence the use of cables to reinforce it (vs. 17), and the boat was filling with water (hence the continuous "lightening" to keep it afloat (vs. 18-19, 38). The only means of navigation available to them (they didn't have GPS back then) were the sun and stars, which were completely hidden (vs. 20).

They were sinking and helpless to stop it, and they were in the dark - they had no idea where they were. Talk about hopeless.

Trials may come into the life of a believer that would make others give up hope. Trials may come into the life of a believer that would make even strong Christians give up hope. Verse 20 would seem to imply the soldiers had given up hope... and the sailors... and even Luke (WE) and maybe Aristarchus. (The following verses confirm, though, that Paul had not lost hope.)

Again - *Acts 14:22 ... we must through MUCH TRIBULATION enter into the kingdom of God.*

ILLUS - Jonah probably felt things were pretty helpless as he felt along the walls of the stomach of the fish that had swallowed him! But God was not done with him yet.

ILLUS - NEED MORE ILLUSTRATION

It is when things look most hopeless that God can look most powerful.

ILLUS - Israel with their backs to the Red Sea - could it have looked more hopeless?

QUOTE - "When it is dark enough, you can see the stars." - Ralph Waldo Emerson

Hopeless is a word that describes our perception, but never describes God's reality. It is in our vocabulary... not in His.

God got them through it.

The sailors had given up... the soldiers had given up... maybe even Luke had given up.... So why not Paul?

The words of Paul in *vss. 23-26* are so wonderful. They give us insight into how Paul dealt with this storm. They also provide insight into how we can deal with any storm that comes our way.

First, imagine the scene. Paul is not standing comfortably at a lectern pontificating to a calm group of listeners seated on padded pews. The ship is tossing like a cork at sea. He is probably holding onto something for dear life. Men are hanging onto things all around him as the ship mounts one wave and then crashes down into the trough, only to start up the wall of another wave. Things are flying about. Water is sloshing over the deck and filling the hold below. The sails are probably in tatters. The noise of the wind is deafening and the boat is creaking and groaning, only held together by the cables that encircle it. Stout men... seasoned sailors and hardened soldiers, are in a state of despair and terror. Shrieks and cries fill the air. Salt spray blinds the eyes.

In the midst of this chaos Paul speaks up with words of encouragement and faith.... "We're gonna get through this!"

I imagine the sailors and soldiers were jolted from their terror long enough to chuckle at this stupid little preacher. "Oh yeah, Paul? Why do you say that? What could possibly give you hope in this hopeless situation?"

What, indeed?

1. Paul believed God was with him. (*vs. 23*)

And believing that is key to getting through the storms of life.

Jesus said in *Matthew 28:20 ...lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.*

That means in the midst of storms.

Hebrews 13:5-6 ... he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.

That means in the midst of storms.

Christian, no matter where you are... no matter what you experience... no matter what happens to you, **GOD IS THERE WITH YOU.**

ILLUS - *Daniel 6:22 My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me...*

Acts 23:11 And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.

2. Paul believed that God OWNED him. (vs. 23)

ILLUS - Jesus prayed for you and me. Listen to how He described you - *John 17:9 I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine. YOU BELONG TO GOD, CHRISTIAN. YOU ARE HIS POSSESSION.*

1 Corinthians 6:20 For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.

YOU BELONG TO GOD.

1 Peter 2:9-10 But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.

Paul knew that He was God's. He belonged to God. God owned him. Such an understanding helped him in the storm, and such an understanding will help you.

ILLUS - Sparrow?

3. Paul believed that God had a PURPOSE and a JOB for him. (vss. 23-24)

We've seen this one before. Back in *Acts 23:11*, when Paul sat discouraged in prison, God had reminded him that he had a plan for Paul's life - a job for Paul to complete - YOU MUST BEAR WITNESS IN ROME.

Paul's understanding that he was God's servant helped him then, and helped him now. If God had something for him to do, he knew God would help him to do it.

Paul knew that God protects His servants.

ILLUS - The 3 Hebrew Children, so often referred to as "servants" of God - *Daniel 3*

ILLUS - Daniel, ditto - *Daniel 6 (Daniel, thou servant of the most high God...)*

NOBODY is safer in the storm than the servants of the living God!

4. Paul believed in PRAYER. (vs. 24)

A promised answer to prayer would imply that prayer had been taking place. "Yes, I give you the souls of all these men" would imply that Paul had been asking for them.

Paul spoke *after long abstinence from food (vs. 21)* implying a period of prayer and fasting.

QUOTE (JFB) - While the crew were toiling at the pumps, Paul was wrestling in prayer, not for himself only and the cause in which he was going a prisoner to Rome, but with true magnanimity of soul for all his shipmates; and God heard him, "giving him" (remarkable expression!) all that sailed with him.

ILLUS - I have been reading the recent biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a man of prayer. His biographer described him thus, "What made him stand out, to some as an inspiration, two others as an oddity, and to others as an offense, was that he did not hope that God heard his prayers, but knew it." (Bonhoeffer, page 237)

5. PAUL BELIEVED GOD! (vs. 25)

This verse is perhaps as descriptive of the heart of Paul the Apostle as any in the Bible. What a great epitaph that would be on a tombstone - "I believe God that it will be us it was told me."

It's easy to believe when the south wind blows softly. But what about in the midst of Euroclydon? What about when *neither sun nor stars appear for many days?* (vs. 20) What about when *no small tempest beats on us?* (vs. 20) What about when, to all observers, *all hope that we should be saved is given up?* (vs. 20) PAUL BELIEVED THEN! WE MUST BELIEVE THEN!

Jeremiah 12:5 If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? and if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?

I love the way Eugene Peterson paraphrased that verse - *So, Jeremiah, if you're worn out in this footrace with men, what makes you think you can race against horses? And if you can't keep your wits during times of calm, what's going to happen when troubles break loose like the Jordan in flood?*

QUOTE (D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones) - Faith is a refusal to panic.

Conclusion:

ILLUS - I once visited with a loved one in the hospital after a surgery. She was in pain and suffering visibly as I visited with her. I asked her if there was anything that could be done, and her response was, "This, too, shall pass."

Notice - ... *all escaped safely to land.* (vs. 44)

The storm that seemed so hopeless, passed.

The sun that had disappeared for days, shone again.

... *all escaped safely to land.* (vs. 44)

Christian, expect the storms. It is in them that you will see the greatest examples of God's deliverance, and the greatest answers to prayer. Don't shy from them. Trust God not only when the south wind blows softly, but when you are exceedingly tossed with the tempest. He will see you through to the other side.

QUOTE - "Don't tell God how big your storm is. Tell the storm how big your God is."

Chapter 12. Digging Deeper in Worship (1)

READ - *Daniel 3*

TEXT - ... *let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up. (Daniel 3:18 NKJV)*

THEME -

Introduction:

Today, I'd like to consider how we might dig deeper in our relationship with God. How do we know Him more... experience Him more... draw closer to Him... put roots down into Him more and more?

Worship is one way. As we worship God, we grow closer to Him, become more in tune with Him. So as we learn more about worship, we will dig deeper in our relationship with God... and fruit will abound.

What is worship, anyway?

My guess is that, if we were to poll the crowd this morning, we'd get some common answers. Some would, no doubt, answer that the word "worship" contains within it the concept of "worth ship," and that when we worship God, we are declaring His worth. Some would, no doubt, point out that worship and music are related. For some reason, the word worship has become somewhat synonymous with the music ministry in 21st century American Christianity. What we are calling our "Praise Team" - a group of believers who lead us in the singing portion of our service, some churches call their Praise and Worship team, or sometimes just their Worship Team. To many Christians, if there is a lot of singing and music in a service, then they have worshipped. If there is no singing and music, or very little, they have not worshipped. Many churches have staff members who are called worship leaders, or worship pastors, whose primary responsibilities revolve around music.

Are these valid distinctions? What about our Wednesday evening prayer meeting - we have grown large enough to include some singing during that service, but for a long time we had none. We just read and applied some Scripture, and then prayed together, and went home. Is such worship? Or is the only time we worship together as a church on Sunday mornings during our so-called Morning Worship Service? Does worship only occur between the hours of 10:30-11:45, then? What about during the Sunday School hour? No music there... any worship?

What is worship, anyway?

Well, let's start by giving some DEFINITIONS-

DEFINITION - Hebrew SAHA - to depress, i.e. prostrate, bow down, crouch, fall down (flat), humbly beseech, do (make) obeisance, do reverence, make to stoop.

DEFINITION - Greek PROSKUNEO - literally "to kiss toward" - pictures the oriental practice of bowing prostrate with hands on ground, and kissing the hand or ground toward the object they are bowing toward. It is a word that means to render homage, and is used of such in reference to men, angels, demons, the Devil, the "beast," idols, or to God. It is rendered 16 times to Jesus as a beneficent superior; at least 24 times to God or to Jesus as God. It is always translated "worship" in the New Testament.

QUOTE (Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words) - The worship of God is nowhere defined in Scripture. A consideration of the above verbs shows that it is not confined to praise; broadly it may be

regarded as the direct acknowledgement to God, of His nature, attributes, ways and claims, whether by the outgoing of the heart in praise and thanksgiving or by deed done in such acknowledgment.

Obviously, as we consider those definitions, it becomes clear doesn't it, that while music may play a part in worship, it is certainly not synonymous with it.

There are over 100 verses containing the word "worship" in the King James Bible. There are also some wonderful examples of worship from which we can learn, in both the Old and New Testaments. I'd like to take some time this morning just considering what we can learn from the word "worship." Then over the next 1 or 2 studies in the series, we can look at some examples, and consider some practical applications.

I chose this story from *Daniel* today because as I read all the verses in the Bible containing the word "worship," I discovered that 11 of them appeared in this chapter. On top of that, I discovered that some of the key truths about worship are beautifully illustrated in this story. So let's consider what we can learn about the word "worship" from three godly men - Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego:

Worship Has An Object.

(And it is God and God alone.)

Nebuchadnezzar was a great king, but he was not worthy of the worship he demanded. At least 10 times in this chapter we read of the image that "he set up." He wanted and demanded worship, but worship is for God and God alone.

The 3 men were clear in their objections to worshipping his image - worship is for God and God alone. cf. *vss. 16-18*

Remembering our definitions - they were saying they would not bow before, or prostrate themselves before, or kiss toward, any but God.

Nebuchadnezzar understood perfectly that this was their objection - they would not worship any god but the one true God - their God - cf. *vs. 28* . (Honor is for kings, but worship is for God alone. - cf. *1 Peter 2:17 Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.*)

It's quite surprising how many verses referencing the word "worship" are actually warnings against worshipping any but God:

Exodus 34:14 For thou shalt worship no other god: for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God:

Deuteronomy 8:19 And it shall be, if thou do at all forget the Lord thy God, and walk after other gods, and serve them, and worship them, I testify against you this day that ye shall surely perish.

Deuteronomy 11:16 Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them;

Psalms 81:9 There shall no strange god be in thee; neither shalt thou worship any strange god.

"Oh, that's not a problem for me, pastor. I would never worship idols, or anything silly like that."

But we actually DO worship idols, all the time. How much time do we spend bowing toward things that WE SET UP?

And all of those are just more Nebuchadnezzars - NONE are deserving of our worship... and none are proper targets for our worship.

Now, let's consider WHY worship is for God and God alone.

1. God DESERVES our worship.

Psalms 29:2 Give unto the Lord the glory due unto his name; worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.

Revelation 14:7 Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.

He alone CREATED, and He alone SUSTAINS, and He alone SUPERINTENDS all that is.

2. He ALONE deserves our worship.

2 Kings 17:36 But the Lord, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt with great power and a stretched out arm, him shall ye fear, and him shall ye worship, and to him shall ye do sacrifice.

Matthew 4:9-10 And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.

Revelation 22:8-9 And I John saw these things, and heard them. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which shewed me these things. Then saith he unto me, See thou do it not: for I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book: worship God.

ILLUS - Nebuchadnezzar got it - cf. vs. 29 - there is no other..

SONG (Steve Green) God and God Alone -

God and God alone created all these things we call our own
From the mighty to the small the Glory in them all is God's and God's alone

God and God alone reveals the truth of all we call unknown and the
best and worst of man wont change the Master's plan it's God's and
God's alone

Chorus: God and God alone is fit to take the universe's throne
Let everything that lives reserve it's truest praise for God and God alone

Yes He is the creator and sustainer of all that is, and is therefore deserving of worship.

And He is the ONLY creator and sustainer of all that is and is therefore the ONLY one worthy of worship.

On top of all that, He loved me enough to save me from hell. What further reason do I need to make Him the sole object of my worship?

Great God of wonders! all Thy ways
Display Thine attributes divine;
But the bright glories of Thy grace
Above Thine other wonders shine:
Who is a pardoning God like Thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?
(58 - Believers Hymnbook)

Worship, then, is about God... because He alone is worthy of it. It is not about our entertainment, but about BOWING BEFORE and ACKNOWLEDGING our God - Who He is... what He did... what He does.. and what we owe Him.

Worship Has A Cost.

We've spoken before of the "First Mention Principal" of Biblical hermeneutics - the principal that reminds us that the first time God speaks on a topic, He gives us His mind on that topic.

Well, the first mention of the word "worship" is found in *Genesis 22:5* *And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.*

Note

(The case can be made that the first mention of the PRACTICE of worship is in the account of Cain and Abel.)

This passage in *Genesis* is a bit problematic if you are one who equates worship with music. Obviously, the two terms are not synonymous here.

After all, Abraham was not planning on holding a song-service with Isaac. There were no hymns or worship choruses in view... no praise band or praise team... no hymnbooks, no organs, pianos, guitars. He held in his hand a knife, with which he intended to sacrifice his son, his only son, Isaac, in obedience to God's command to do so.

If there is a thought that arises from this first mention of worship, it is sacrifice... it is offering... it is cost.

And can we deny that in our text, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego paid a price for their decisions regarding worship? It COST them.

Worshipping God cost them their relationship with their peers (i.e. their reputation) - (cf. *Daniel 3:12*.) It cost them their relationship with their king, before whom they were previously held in high esteem (i.e. their careers) (cf. *Daniel 3:13, 2:49*.) Had not God intervened wonderfully, it would have cost them their lives... a cost they were willing to pay (cf. *Daniel 3:17-18*.)

I believe we'll come back to this thought in future studies on worship. We'll examine examples such as David, who when preparing to worship and sacrifice to God, said, *2 Samuel 24:24* ... *neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the Lord my God of that which doth cost me nothing.* (Allow me to paraphrase David's words - NO COST NO WORSHIP.)

We'll see examples such as the woman who worshipped Jesus in the house of Simon the leper - *Mark 14:3* *And being in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at meat, there came a woman having an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard very precious; and she brake the box, and poured it on his head.* Notice - VERY PRECIOUS - allow me to paraphrase once again - it COST her.

Both King David, and the woman at Simon's house, declare to us that true worship is not possible if it does not cost something. That's an interesting concept, isn't it? But it's seen scattered throughout the references to "worship" in the Bible.

Amazing how many so-called Christians are willing to name the name of Christ as long as it doesn't cost anything. In their mind, worship is synonymous with entertainment, and they will come "worship" as long as they are being sufficiently entertained, but when "their needs are no longer being met" they stop "worshipping."

I challenge you to find that thinking in your Bibles. You are intelligent people, and can discern these things on your own. Do what I did - pick up a Bible concordance and look up the word "worship." You will see that SACRIFICE and COST is a major component of the word.

QUOTE - "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him." (C.T. Studd, English missionary to China, India, and Africa)

Conclusion:

"Well, that's just fascinating, pastor, but I still say music is a major component in worship, and what I want to know is 'where does music fit into all of this?'"

Of the 100+ verses in the Bible containing the word "worship," the only place I found music associated with the word was in this chapter. And it is associated with false worship... worship of an idol!

We do see, however, an example of how music leads to worship... influences worship.... When they experienced the music, the result was supposed to be worship. Nebuchadnezzar wasn't far from the truth with that thinking, even if he was messed up on the correct object of worship.

When we get into the examples of worship in the Bible, we will see more clearly the role that music plays in worship. You'll have to come for the future studies to hear that, though.

There are some other truths we can glean from our study of the word "worship". If you take the challenge and study it out, you'll see both individual and corporate examples of worship. Neither should be minimized. You'll see that the internal prompting of the Holy Spirit is a key component in true worship. We will probably examine Jesus' key teaching on the subject in *John 4* where we'll learn that true worship cannot happen apart from the Spirit of God and the Word of God.

In other words, we'll learn that it's not possible to worship God apart from a saving knowledge of God. We cannot worship Him if we don't know Him.

Those who are enemies of God do not bow in reverential praise toward Him. We must first come to know Who He is, and what amazing grace He has shown toward us... THEN we cannot help but bow... and THEN we cannot help but worship... and THEN we cannot help but sing:

I stand amazed in the presence
of Jesus the Nazarene,
And wonder how He could love me
a sinner, condemned, unclean.

How marvelous, How wonderful,
And my song shall ever be -
How marvelous, How wonderful,
Is my Savior's love for me.

We'll continue digging deeper into worship over the next few weeks.

But let's conclude our first foray into worship with this understanding of the word - it has an object - God. It is costly. And it springs from the relationship we have with God and the Holy Spirit which indwells the child of God.

Chapter 13. The Final Chapter

READ - *Acts 28:1-31*

TEXT - *Then Paul dwelt... preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ... (Acts 28:30-31)*

THEME - We are writing the final chapter of Acts

Introduction:

Solomon said, in *Ecclesiastes 12:13* "let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter." Today, we finally come to the last chapter in our long study in *Acts*. I can honestly say that it has been one of the most profitable studies I've ever personally undertaken. I pray it has been so for God's church here, too.

We have learned so much! Here is how one of my favorite commentators on *Acts* sums up the book:

"The first 7 chapters of Acts focused on the earliest witness of the believers in Jerusalem. It was a wonderful witness. Miracles were done. The Gospel was proclaimed. The church was established. Deacons were chosen. They were formative days for the infant church.

Acts 8-12 chronicles the spread of the gospel to the outlying regions of Judea and Samaria. This was the result of persecution following the death of Stephen. Persecution forced the Christians to scatter into more secluded areas.

Acts 13 tells the beginning of the great missionary expansion of the church to the rest of the world. Paul and Barnabas began to travel, and the missionary journeys eventually took Paul throughout Asia into Europe. Important churches were established in Thessalonica, Philippi, Corinth, and Ephesus. Now, at the very end of the book, the apostle comes to Rome. Thus Jesus' prophecies that His disciples would be 'his witnesses to the ends of the earth' is fulfilled.

The empire has been reached with the Gospel." (Boice, pp. 417-418)

Today, as we turn our attention to the last chapter, we see Paul, and all his traveling companions, surviving the harrowing sea voyage and shipwreck described in *chapter 27*. They are cast ashore on the island of Malta (*vs. 1*), where they will spend 3 months (*vs. 11*) waiting for the weather to clear sufficiently for safe travel again. One source (Boice) explained that they probably arrived here in November, and were therefore here until approximately February. Once they were able to sail again, they had an uneventful voyage from Malta to Rome (*vs. 14*). Paul is and remains a prisoner while in Rome, although he is given an extraordinary amount of freedom (*vss. 16,30*). Paul remains imprisoned in Rome for the next two years (*vs. 30*).

And so, with this final chapter, the book of Acts ends.

One last time, let's see what we can learn from this wonderful book:

We learn that when God starts to do something, He finishes it.

Paul had wanted to see Rome, and had received God's promise that he would, indeed, get there.

Let's do a quick review - *Acts 19:21; 23:11; 27:24*

And he GOT THERE. (cf. vs. 14). "... so we went toward Rome." (NKJV) is better translated "... so we came to Rome."

I considered that as the key verse for this chapter - THEY GOT THERE.

What a wonderful reminder of the power and sovereignty of God. His promises are always fulfilled.

Philippians 1:6 Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ:

1 Kings 8:56 Blessed be the Lord, that hath given rest unto his people Israel, according to all that he promised: there hath not failed one word of all his good promise, which he promised by the hand of Moses his servant.

We learn still more about Paul

(Every glimpse into this man's life has been instructive, hasn't it? I've come to so love Paul from these studies.)

1. What a servant he was (vs. 3)

I am convicted by this, for it reminds me of how important it is to do whatever needs done for the kingdom. We all have spiritual gifts, and we've spoken often of the importance of learning those gifts and exercising them in the local church for the glory of God. But sometimes we go too far with that thinking, and forgo important areas of service because "that's not our gift." Paul was willing to do anything that needed done. I doubt he had the gift of gathering sticks. Actually, he was pretty lousy at it, since he couldn't tell the difference between a stick and a snake! But he did what needed doing.

2. What a workhorse he was (vs. 17)

There was no extended period of rest and / or relaxation after his harrowing winter of travel. There was no well-deserved vacation. There was WORK TO DO, and nothing kept him from getting right to work at his ministry.

ILLUS - I cannot help but share a thought I read this past week in a John Piper sermon. The sermon was a biographical sermon about Charles Spurgeon, the great pastor and preacher in London during the 19th century. In a section of Piper's sermon headed "He was a hard working preacher," he made these observations about Spurgeon:

I do not look to soft and leisurely men to instruct me how to endure adversity. If the main answer is, "Take it easy," I look for another teacher.

Take a glimpse of this man's capacity for work:

"No one living knows the toil and care I have to bear... I have to look after the Orphanage, have charge of a church with four thousand members, sometimes there are marriages and burials to be undertaken, there is the weekly sermon to be revised, The Sword and the Trowel to be edited, and besides all that, a weekly average of five hundred letters to be answered. This, however, is only half my duty, for there are innumerable churches established by friends, with the affairs of which I am closely connected, to say nothing of the cases of difficulty which are constantly being referred to me" (see note 21)

At his 50th birthday a list of 66 organizations was read that he founded and conducted. Lord Shaftesbury was there and said, "This list of associations, instituted by his

genius, and superintended by his care, were more than enough to occupy the minds and hearts of fifty ordinary men" (see note 22)

He typically read six substantial books a week and could remember what he read and where to find it (see note 23).

He produced more than 140 books of his own - books like *The Treasury of David*, which was twenty years in the making, and *Morning and Evening*, and *Commenting on Commentaries*, and *John Ploughman's Talk*, and *Our Own Hymnbook* (see note 24).

He often worked 18 hours in a day. The missionary David Livingstone, asked him once, "How do you manage to do two men's work in a single day?" Spurgeon replied, "You have forgotten there are two of us" (see note 25). I think he meant the presence of Christ's energizing power that we read about in Colossians 1:29 . Paul says, "I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me." "There are two of us."

Spurgeon's attitude toward sacrificial labor would not be acceptable today where the primacy of "wellness" seems to hold sway.

He said, "If by excessive labour, we die before reaching the average age of man, worn out in the Master's service, then glory be to God, we shall have so much less of earth and so much more of Heaven!" (see note 26).

"It is our duty and our privilege to exhaust our lives for Jesus. We are not to be living specimens of men in fine preservation, but living sacrifices, whose lot is to be consumed" (see note 27).

(Charles Spurgeon, *Preaching Through Adversity*, by John Piper)

This ought to convict us all. It certainly does me. I've been suffering from extreme fatigue lately. Forgive me if I've been less attentive or ambitious lately around here. I'm not sure why, but I have simply had no energy to do anything. I'm praying God helps me with that, because this kind of thing convicts me greatly, and should convict us all of our laziness for the the kingdom!

ILLUS - We've mentioned Paul's last letter before, and how it ends. Notice it again in this context - *Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come - and the books, especially the parchments.* (2 Timothy 4:13 NKJV)

PAUL never quit working!

3. What a preacher he was (vs. 23)

... from morning till evening... (vs. 23)

Let your eyeballs fall on those 4 little words for a minute... give them a few seconds thought. He preached, and taught and explained from MORNING TILL EVENING! The means ALL DAY... a WHOLE day.

We saw another example of this in an earlier passage - *Acts 20:9*. Where the NKJV says that Paul "continued preaching" there, the KJV has it "Paul was LONG PREACHING." I like that.

Now there are two ways to look at this, aren't there? I'm amazed, as one who labors to bring a message from the Word week in and week out, at Paul's ability to provide the output he did! We all ought to be convicted, too, by the willingness of the audience to LISTEN to it. In America today, people complain

if a sermon is more than 20 minutes in length. Of course, this is the same crowd that has no trouble spending 3 hours staring raptly at the flickering images of a movie!

Both preachers and hearers should spend some time meditating on and learning from vs. 23

4. What a soul winner he was (vs. 30)

He preached to... met with... taught all who came to him.

If the only hearer was a guard, he got the full treatment. If you knocked on Paul's door, you were gonna hear it! He was a SOUL WINNER.

ILLUS - I knew a man named John who had a tract ministry in New Jersey in a flea market called Cow Town. He would stand in front of his little tract-laden booth every week and hand tracts to everybody who would take one. I once went on a hospital call with John, who was a member of my church. I recall a woman entering the elevator with John and me. The elevator doors closed. The three of us were alone in that confined space for just a few seconds. John seemed deep in thought, and then he let out a little "huh" as if acknowledging some sort of impulse, retrieved one of his tracts from his jacket pocket, and handed it to the woman. John, like Paul, was a soul winner, and wanted to share the good news that Jesus saves everybody - with EVERYBODY.

Here, then, is our last picture in *Acts* ... the last glimpse that Luke shares with us, of the great missionary and apostle Paul - talking about Jesus to anybody who would listen.

And what a great picture it is.

We are reminded, once again, of the theme of the book of Acts.

cf. *Acts 1:8*

This series of sermons has been called "Power and Witness" because of the two inseparable halves of that key verse - the POWER of the Holy Spirit and the WITNESS of believers.

1. Holy Spirit power is seen here once again (just as from *Acts 1:8* on).

- In the matter of the snake (vss. 3-6)
- In the healing of the ruler's father and others who needed healing (vss. 7-9)

Both of these are examples of spiritual gifts and abilities which were unique to the apostles.

We have not talked about the apostolic gifts which figure so prominently in *Acts* for a while. But they were there, right up until this last chapter.

READ - *Mark 16:14-18*

Did you notice vs. 18, which is so exactly demonstrated (even to the form of laying on of hands to heal the sick) here?

These were the signs of an apostle, described in *2 Corinthians 12:12*

REMINDER that we do not believe these gifts are for today, because there are no apostles today. You can get the printed versions of the earlier messages if you missed our reasoning in that argument, but

just a reminder today - the gifts of healing, and speaking in tongues, and miracles were apostolic - unique gifts for a group of 12 unique men who had the unique mission of establishing the church, and through whom the Holy Spirit produced the New Testament. Once the New Testament was complete, the need for the authenticating gifts of the apostles was gone, and the gifts ceased to be given.

2. WITNESSING is seen here everywhere.

- To the natives around the fire on Malta
 - To those in attendance at the home of Publius
 - In the address to the Jewish leaders in Rome
 - To the soldiers who were constantly with Paul
- cf. (vs. 16) - imagine what it must have been like for these Roman guards!
- eventually to everybody who Paul could get to hear - (vs. 30)

QUOTE ACTS 1:8 again - it is the theme of the book, from chapter 1 all the way through chapter 28

We are reminded, one last time, of the star of the book of Acts.

1. It was not Peter (even though he was central in the first 7 chapters)
2. It was not Stephen or Philip or any of the first deacons (even though chapters 7-12 feature them prominently).
3. It was not Paul (even though the majority of the book, chapters 13-28, center around his life, his person, and his ministry).
4. IT WAS THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST THAT WAS CENTRAL.

The book of *Acts* is not about Paul, or Peter, or any other of the characters so richly described therein. The book of *Acts* is about the spread of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ (i.e. the gospel) from its beginnings in Jerusalem, to the uttermost parts of the earth.

You shall be witnesses - it was that witness - that message - that was central throughout the book.

"preaching the kingdom... teaching the things concerning Jesus Christ" - that's how it ends, with the GOSPEL - the MESSAGE that Jesus Christ is the risen Savior and King.

One could consider the ending somewhat sad, if we consider Paul the central figure - for it ends with him imprisoned... if all we had was Acts to refer to, we might conclude that was the way Paul's history ended entirely - defeated, imprisoned, in chains (for even when in his own rented house, he would still be chained every moment to a guard).

But the star of the show was not Paul - rather the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it was not in chains... it was not imprisoned... it was not bound.

READ - *Philippians 1:12-17* to get Paul's take on this. (Written during this two year imprisonment)

Isaiah 55:11 So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.

Conclusion:

Yes, we learn a lot from this FINAL CHAPTER of *Acts*.

Mostly though, we learn how it all ended.

Or do we? As we sit with our Bible in our laps, our eyes on that last verse of this wonderful book, several questions remain unanswered, don't they?

How did Peter's life end? (We are not told)

How did Paul's life end? (We are left hanging on that, with a final picture of him sitting in his living room)

Interesting that a historian of such accurate tendency as Luke would just stop his history here, isn't it? One would expect a good rousing conclusion. One would expect something like Solomon gave in Ecclesiastes, and which we quoted in our introduction - LET US HEAR THE CONCLUSION....

But it is not there, is it?

Now, based on clues in Paul's letters, we are able to piece together a remaining history for Paul:

What happened to the Apostle Paul? Historians are divided. The general opinion today is that Paul was released after two years. Paul may have traveled to other places. The last books he wrote were the pastoral epistles, 2 Timothy especially, and he seems to refer to things in those books that may not have happened in the historical time frame Luke presents in Acts. Paul may have traveled to the west. He may have gotten to Spain. He seems to have gone to Crete.

The tradition in the church is that Paul returned to Rome after the great fire of A.D. 64. There was such an outcry from the people because of this fire that Nero blamed it on the Christians. Eusebius says that Paul came back shortly after that, in a time of hostility toward Christians, was arrested, and eventually was martyred. (Boice, p. 431)

ILLUS - I have stood in a dark dungeon cell in the Mamertine Prison in Rome. Historical evidence is good that it was in that very cell Paul spent his last imprisonment. It is believed that he wrote his last letter, *2 Timothy*, from that very cell. It was far removed from the house he is said to have rented here during his first imprisonment.

But we get none of that from *Acts* - the story just ends.

ILLUS - I recall listening to a sermon by a favorite preacher once, when just as I was really getting blessed by the message, and just when it was getting really interesting, he looked at his watch and said, "I'm out of time, let's pray." No wrap up... no conclusion... no summarization... just DONE.

So ends the book of Acts. Why?

If we believe that the human author of *Acts*, (Luke), was inspired by the Holy Spirit of God (and we do believe that)... if we believe that this book, like all the 66 books of our Bibles is God breathed (and we DO believe that - cf. *2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,*), then we must wonder not just why Luke chose this abrupt ending, but why the Holy Spirit of God chose this abrupt ending.

And here is why I think that ending was chosen - because, the portion of the book of Acts that concerned Paul was over, but the book of Acts is not. You see, there was much yet to be written, and there is much to be written still. Peter was not the last chapter. Paul was not the last chapter. You are. I am. We are living the final chapters of Acts today.

We carry on the work, which is not yet done. Paul and others did their part... reached their world, but we have not yet reached ours!

That key verse - *Acts 1:8, But ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you, and ye shall be witnesses unto me...* was not just written to Peter, or to Paul. It was, and is, for you and for me as well.

SO MUCH TO DO, SO MANY TO TELL, and SO LITTLE TIME LEFT.

ILLUS - In J.R.R. Tolkien's wonderful trilogy of books, *The Lord of the Rings*, Bilbo Baggins spent his life writing his memoirs. He called them "There and Back Again." At the end of his life he gave the book to Frodo Baggins, his nephew, and pointed out to Frodo that there was still room at the end for more, and that it was Frodo who would have to write those chapters.

Perhaps we can hear Dr. Luke calling to us this morning. "The book is not quite finished yet. There is still room for more, but those pages are up to you."

Chapter 14. Digging Deeper in Worship

- 2

READ - *Psalm 96*

TEXT - *Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness! (Psalm 96:9a NKJV)*

THEME - Holiness is a key component of worship.

Introduction:

Have I told you the story of Willard? Willard was a member of the Faithway Class which I used to teach at Emmanuel Baptist Church. It was a large class consisting entirely of mentally and physically disabled men and women whom we bussed in from various half-way houses and institutions around us. We usually had 50 or so in attendance on a Sunday. As incentive, we sometimes provided a meal after the service, and on one particular Sunday, we served hot dogs to them all. Willard came to the front the line, received his hot dog, and stuffed the entire thing in his mouth. He then turned and walked to the end of the line. We watched as he worked his way to the front of the line and stood waiting for another hot dog. The first was still entirely in his mouth and he was having trouble keeping it there. "Willard, didn't you already get a hot dog," we asked. He vehemently shook his head NO and so we gave him another. Amazingly, he stuffed the entire thing in his mouth and returned to the end of the line. By the time he made it to the front of the line the 3rd time, the tears were streaming down his face and he was struggling mightily to get those two hot dogs down. But he was gonna get another! We told him to go sit down, though, and if he still wanted another he could have it after he finished the first two.

You know, the deeper I dig into this amazing book called The Bible, the more I sometimes feel like Willard - like I've bitten off more than I can chew. And this morning, as I ponder the subject God has placed before us, I have just such a feeling. This is interesting stuff... deep stuff... wonderful stuff...

Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness! (Psalm 96:9a NKJV)

Worship is the topic we've chosen for a brief study. We started two weeks ago by taking a brief look at the word "worship" and trying to learn a thing or two. It was instructive, and we did learn some things. For example, we learned that WORSHIP HAS AN OBJECT - God and God alone. And we learned that WORSHIP HAS A COST - it is about sacrifice and giving. The first reference in our English Bible to the word worship is in *Genesis 22:5*, where we see Abraham preparing to sacrifice his only son Isaac to God on an altar, and calling that an act of worship.

The next step in our plan is to examine a couple of key texts on worship. We will certainly have to look at *John 4:24* - a key New Testament passage where Jesus said that *God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.*

Another passage that seemed key to me when I first laid out this study is here - *Psalm 96*, especially vs. 9 *Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness!* In studying this week, though, I found myself more and more grappling with just what that means. Do you know? What does it mean to worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness? It is obviously an important concept for it's repeated in scripture - (cf. *1 Chronicles 16:29, Psalm 29:2*).

So let's dig a little deeper and see if we can understand it - we want to dig deeper in our relationship with God. We want to know Him more and grow closer to Him. We want to put roots down into the soil of our relationship with God, in the knowledge that doing so will bring promised fruit - abundant fruit - glorious fruit (cf. *Isaiah 37:31*)

Maybe *Psalm 96* will help us do that.

Now, as we consider *Psalm 96*, a couple of themes jump out at us. Certainly, one theme that is seen clearly in this passage is missions - We don't get far into it before we see that thought. (cf. *vss. 1 - all the earth, 3 - among the nations, 7 - families of the peoples, 9 - all the earth, 10 - say among the nations - 13 - He is coming to judge the earth... the world... and the peoples...*)

ILLUS - Our missions display in the back is a wonderful answer to prayer for me. I've been wanting that for a couple years now, and God has put it on the hearts of several of our number to make it a reality. Praise the Lord. That display will remind us everytime we see it of just how important it is that we reach our world for Jesus.

Yes - this psalm is a good text to preach missions from. And we are a church that believes in and emphasizes missionary outreach - UNAPOLOGETICALLY.

But I think worship is another main emphasis in this Psalm, perhaps THE main emphasis, and not only is it seen in our text (*vs. 9*) but throughout.

Let's break it down:

Some observations from the entire psalm

Consider a few thoughts that we can glean from the psalm as a whole -

1. We learn, as we have just seen, that worship is for all (cf. *vs. 1*)

NOT just for Randolph... our families... our friends. It is NOT just for our culture... for America... for the western world. It is for ALL THE EARTH!

Go ye into ALL THE WORLD... (Mark 16:15)

Go ye therefore and teach ALL NATIONS... (Matthew 28:19)

But ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you, and ye shall be witnesses unto me in Jerusalem, and Judea, and Samaria, and unto the UTTERMOST PART OF THE EARTH. (Acts 1:8)

2. We learn, just as we did last week, that we are to worship God alone.

Every verse except *vss. 11-12* emphasizes Jehovah!

3. We learn some interesting things about HOW we should worship.

- Musically - *vs. 1* - THERE IT IS. We were looking for music in our study last time and couldn't find much of it. Worship is, after all, not synonymous with singing as some would have us believe. The word worship means to bow down, to prostrate before, or in the New Testament, to "kiss toward." But one of the ways we see worship acted out throughout the Bible is in singing - and we see that here. We'll see even more of it in a future discussion.
- Witness and testimony - *vss. 2,10* - did you know that when you proclaim the good news of his salvation you are worshipping? Did you know that when you support world wide missionary endeavor, it is an act of worship?
- Bringing an offering - *vs. 8* - not because He needs our money - but because it is an act of worship!

We don't ask the community to support this church. If we don't believe in God enough here at FBC to worship Him with our tithes and offerings, it's absolutely ludicrous to ask unbelievers in the

community to make up for our lack of worship. Besides that, it is unscriptural. NO raffles... NO fund raisers. The tithes and offerings of God's people are what funds this local church and that is the Bible way - it is WORSHIP.

- Coming into His courts - vs. 8 - just the simple act of gathering is an act of worship.
- Living holy lives - vs. 9 - but put that one on the back burner for a minute - we'll come back to it.

4. We learn some of the reasons (and they are infinite, really) WHY we should worship.

- Because He saved us - vs. 2

I stand amazed in the presence
Of Jesus the Nazarene,
And wonder how He could love me,
A sinner, condemned, unclean.

He took my sins and my sorrows,
He made them His very own;
He bore the burden to Calvary,
And suffered and died alone.

O how marvelous! O how wonderful!
And my song shall ever be:
O how marvelous! O how wonderful!
Is my Savior's love for me!

- Because He is great - vs. 4

ILLUS - One of the first prayers children learn - "God is GREAT, God is good, let us thank Him for our food." Parents, you won't go wrong by teaching your children, from the very first, that GOD IS GREAT.

- Because He is powerful and majestic and strong and beautiful - vs. 5-6
- Because He is righteous and true - vs. 13
- Because He is COMING and because He will JUDGE - vs. 13

ILLUS - And world events certainly point to the imminence of His return, don't they?

5. We learn some things about WHEN we should worship.

Certainly, when we consider vs. 8 - *come into His courts*, we see a reminder of the importance of periodically gathering, as we do here at FBC on the first day of the week, the Lord's Day. Vital... important... crucial... that we gather in worship regularly and periodically. But when we consider vs. 2 - *day to day*, we see that it is also continual... every day... an activity that needs to be interwoven into everything else we do.

All good stuff! Perhaps you, like me, want to dig deeper... to understand what it means to worship God! This psalm seems to help with that. Every verse seems to help with that.

But, there is one verse here that we need to park on - vs. 9 - what did God mean when He inspired David to write those words - *Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness?* It is, after all, the only verse in the psalm that actually contains the word worship. It would seem to be a key concept, then.

Some observations from verse 9

1. It is an imperative... a command... something we SHOULD do... something that if we are at all interested in obeying God, we WILL do. - *WORSHIP THE LORD!*
2. It is a lifestyle.

The phrase "beauty of holiness" modifies "worship" - it describes, explains, or illustrates worship.

As I studied this passage this week, I really tried to get my brain around the phrase "beauty of holiness". One thing I did was to read this psalm in every major English translation of the Bible. I found a fairly wide variation in how it was rendered. The "beauty of holiness" could refer to:

- "in holy attire" - I.e. How we come before Him - so the NASB and RSV and ASV.

How we appear says something of our heart toward God. I know I take some heat for my stand on this, but so be it. I know I'm right. I'm in a suit this morning because it's one of the best things I have in my closet. I have crummier clothes... lesser clothes... but I want to wear my best for God.

ILLUS - I wore a white tuxedo on my wedding day.

ILLUS - I have been on a lot of job interviews. The last round of interviews I participated in, I had a head hunter working with me, and I asked him, "In this day and age of 'office casual' dress, do I need to wear a suit to the interviews." He looked at me aghast and said, "Wear a suit... always a suit... ALWAYS A SUIT."

Why in the world do we want to give God LESS than we give the world? Why less than we give our wives? Why less than we give our worldly employer?

As I said, I know some of you violently disagree with me on this, but I can guarantee you don't do so based on Biblical reasons, for you have none. We are to give our firstfruits to God... we are to give our BEST to God.

OK... I'll climb down off that soap box now.

- "in the glorious sanctuary - I.e. Where we come before him - so the TSK
- splendor rather than beauty - so ESV, NLT, NIV

We are working toward some remodeling here in our sanctuary. Our carpeting is worn out and needs replaced. Our platform needs updated, and our seating needs expansion. In our meetings to discuss these much needed changes, I've reminded the team of David's words concerning the temple he wanted to build for God. He said it must be "EXCEEDING MAGNIFICAL." Splendiferous!

- his holiness rather than ours - i.e. A reason for our worship - so NLT, NIV

He IS the very definition of the word.

Exodus 15:11 Who is like You, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, Fearful in praises, doing wonders?

Psalms 99:9 Exalt the Lord our God, And worship at His holy hill; For the Lord our God is holy.

ILLUS - When Isaiah the prophet experienced his vision of the throne of God, he saw seraphim flying above the throne, *Isaiah 6:3 And one cried to another and said: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!*

- our attempts at holiness - I.e. An attempt at practicing worship... Another "how" we worship - all but NLT,NIV

So which is it? What does vs. 9 mean????

Perhaps neither of them is totally the answer Perhaps it is all of them - all truths we need to consider about worship. How we do it - in holy attire, Where we do it - in His holy sanctuary (although both these points are also in tension with the "day to day" thought in vs. 3), why we do it - because of the beauty of His holiness, how we do it (and I lean toward this being the primary meaning) - by living a life that is beautifully holy, ourselves.

Conclusion:

If I had to pick just one of those possible interpretations of this passage, though, I would side with the last one - worshipping the Lord in the beauty of holiness refers to worshipping him by cultivating holy lives.

Nothing is more worshipful than holiness. To dedicate our lives to God... to separate ourselves from sin... to pursue Him... to live according to His word and attempt with our every breath to conform our lives to His character - these are what it means to seek holiness... and there is no greater act of worship.

After all, holiness IS beautiful. As we grow in holiness, we become more like Him.. more like the Master... more like our Savior... and there is no greater beauty than we see in our Lord.

Beautiful Savior, King of Creation
Son of God and Son of Man!
Truly I'd love Thee, truly I'd serve Thee,
Light of my soul, my joy, my crown.

Fair are the meadows, Fair are the woodlands,
Robed in the flowers of blooming spring;
Jesus is fairer, Jesus is purer,
He makes our sorrowing spirit sing.

Fair is the sunshine, Fair is the moonlight,
Bright the sparkling stars on high;
Jesus shines brighter, Jesus shines purer
Than all the angels in the sky.

Beautiful Savior, Lord of the nations,
Son of God and Son of Man!
Glory and honor, Praise, adoration
Now and forevermore be Thine!

And so, here is the challenge, church - let us worship our Lord in the beauty of holiness... let us do it every Lord's Day as we gather here... let us do it from day to day... let us do it until He comes, *for He is coming, for He is coming to judge the earth.*

Chapter 15. Digging Deeper in Worship

(3)

READ - *John 4:1-26*

TEXT - *But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4:23-24 NKJV)*

THEME - True worship comes from our spirit, prompted by His Spirit... It is sincere and based in His truth.

Introduction:

In our efforts to dig deeper in our relationship with God... to sink our roots down... we have been talking about worship. I have found it a very interesting and challenging topic. When I first selected it, I thought it would be a help "practically" as it would focus our attention on things like singing and music in our worship services. I am always and ever concerned that our services glorify God and not ourselves... that they are Christ-honoring and worshipful, rather than trite and entertaining... that when we experience a worship service here we are drawn closer to God, and when we leave we know that we have met God in this place, and bowed ourselves before Him. Of course, music is not the only part of our services that needs to be worshipful - all parts of our service do. But as we've mentioned in the past few studies, when we think of worship, we usually think of music. And so I thought in taking up this topic, that it would give an opportunity to get into the matter of music in worship, and help us in that area.

But the topic got deep real fast, didn't it? It wasn't long before we learned that worship is a far bigger subject than just singing, or music. We found ourselves digging deeper into difficult soil the minute we started. Remember some of the things we learned about worship?

1. First, we learned that the word, like any other word, has a meaning. Worship means to bow before, to ascribe honor and worth to.
2. When we studied the word "worship" we learned that worship has both an OBJECT (God and God alone) and a COST. We learned that a primary aspect of worship is sacrifice. No sacrifice... no cost - no worship. We saw that the very first mention of the word "worship" in our Bibles was when Abraham told his servants to wait while he and Isaac went yonder to "worship." Abraham was planning to sacrifice his son Isaac, in obedience to God's command. Worship COST him... worship was a SACRIFICE.
3. Then we turned our attention to a key verse describing worship - *Psalm 96:9 - Oh worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.* From that we learned that holiness, manifested in a variety of ways, is a key component to worship. We learned that this holiness shows up in HOW we worship - in holy attire, WHERE we worship - in His holy sanctuary, WHY we worship - because of the beauty of His holiness. We learned that the primary means of worship is not something we do on a periodic basis in a church service, but rather it is accomplished by living a life that is beautifully holy, ourselves.

What we have been discovering is that worship, in reality, describes what our relationship with God should look like everywhere - not just in church services, and everyday - not just on Sunday mornings.

In our text this morning, we see yet another vital truth from scripture about the subject - TEXT. Where we have learned that worship requires SACRIFICE, and worship requires HOLINESS, today we learn that worship requires SPIRIT and worship requires TRUTH.

Worship requires SPIRIT.

But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4:23-24 NKJV)

Now there are a couple ways we can interpret worshipping "in spirit":

1. Worship is something INTERNAL rather than EXTERNAL.

Notice that the woman in our story was concerned about EXTERNALS of worship, particularly WHERE worship should occur. Jesus said that was not the main point. It was a VALID point... he did point out to her that there is a right and a wrong way to worship, and that in this case the Jews had it right (vs. 22). But it was not the MAIN point. WHO, not WHERE, was the main point...INTERNAL, rather than merely EXTERNAL.

QUOTE (Matthew Henry) - The stress is not to be laid upon the place where we worship God, but upon the state of mind in which we worship him.

(It may show up externally, but if it doesn't start from inside, it's not true worship.)

It is entirely possible, isn't it, to just go through the motions of worship, without it being a reality in our life?

ILLUS - Friend who got balled up in charismatic church - taught how to speak in tongues - "say this..." - completely imitated and external. He was, rightly, disillusioned.

There is more to you than just your body. The real you is not this broken body. The real you is what God put inside that body. (cf. *Genesis 2:7*) Although we might do something physical that seems outwardly to be worshipful, if it does not spring from our spirit - if it is only external - it is meaningless.

aren't we guilty of this sometimes... Guilty of just going through the motions of worship? Of it being only external and not internal? God has a lot to say about that:

READ - *Isaiah 1:10-15*

1 Samuel 16:7 (KJV 1900) But the Lord said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.

Matthew 15:8-9 (KJV 1900) This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

2. Worship requires our spirit in agreement with His spirit.

Only those indwelt by the Holy Spirit can worship.

QUOTE (Bible Knowledge Commentary) - Worship of God can be done only through the One (Jesus) who expresses God's invisible nature (John 1:18 (KJV 1900) No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.) and by virtue of the Holy Spirit who opens to a believer the new realm of the kingdom (cf. John 7:38-39 (KJV 1900) He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)).

QUOTE (Warren Wiersbe) - Only those who have the indwelling Holy Spirit, and who obey the truth, can worship God acceptably.

An unsaved person might go through the motions of worshipping, but they cannot and will not worship.

Worship requires TRUTH.

But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4:23-24 NKJV)

1. Truth is SINCERITY - that which is REAL.

Again, this word "truth" has a couple of meanings which are helpful.

Matthew Henry says this means SINCERITY. In other words - not HYPOCRISY.

ILLUS - Satan was standing outside a church building one Sunday morning. Inside, the people were singing, praying, and listening to preaching. A passerby asked Satan if that did not bother him. With a demonic, sneering laugh he replied negatively. Then he added, "They get that way on Sunday, but they will be all right on Monday. It's just a little habit they've acquired."

God save us from such a habit. Our worship is to make a difference in who we are and what we do. It is to be SINCERE. IT IS TO BE REAL.

Paul equated such sincerity with right motives:

Philippians 1:18 (KJV 1900) What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.

Jesus taught a similar truth when He warned against being like the Pharisees. *But all their works they do for to be seen of men...* (Matthew 23:5 KJV)

We hear the excuse from unbelievers all the time, "I would come to church, but there are too many hypocrites there." That won't hold up for them at their judgement, but it IS SADLY TRUE.

So for our worship to be in TRUTH, it needs to be sincere... it needs to spring from right, God honoring motives... and it needs to be REAL.

If it is these things... If it is real, then we will not neglect it, for any reason, will we?

ILLUS - On Sunday morning, September 27, 1959, President Eisenhower invited Khrushchev to accompany him to a worship service at Gettysburg Presbyterian Church. The Red leader declined and Eisenhower went without him.

2. Truth is TRUTH - that which is REALITY.

ILLUS - Pilate asked Jesus, "What is truth?" Jesus didn't answer him that day, but He did define truth for us in other places. For example:

- I am the truth!

I am the way, THE TRUTH, and the life. (John 14:6 KJV)

- The Word of God is the truth!

(Daniel 10:21 KJV) But I will shew thee that which is noted in the scripture of truth: and there is none that holdeth with me in these things, but Michael your prince.

(John 17:17 KJV) Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

- The church is the pillar and ground of the truth!

... I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:15 NKJV)

I think I see a progression there. If you, like Pilate, wonder "what is truth" then put those three thoughts together: Truth is seen in the person of Jesus, it is learned from the pages of the Bible, and it is lived out in the fellowship and community found in the church.

Want to know the truth? Read your Bible, and come to church!

The Bible has SO MUCH TO SAY about truth!

QUOTE (Nave's Topical) - Saints should worship God in, John 4:24, with Psa. 145:18; serve God in, Josh. 24:14; 1 Sam. 12:24; walk before God in, 1 Kin. 2:4; 2 Kin. 20:3; keep religious feasts with, 1 Cor. 5:8; esteem, as inestimable, Prov. 23:23; love, Zech. 8:19; rejoice in, 1 Cor. 13:6; speak, to one another, Zech. 8:16; Eph. 4:25; execute judgment with, Zech. 8:16; meditate upon, Phil. 4:8; bind, about the neck, Prov. 3:3; write, upon the tables of the heart, Prov. 3:3. The fruit of the Spirit is in, Eph. 5:9. Ministers should speak, 2 Cor. 12:6; Gal. 4:16; teach in, 1 Tim. 2:7; approve themselves by, 2 Cor. 6:7, 8. Magistrates should be men of, Ex. 18:21. Kings are preserved by, Prov. 20:28.

Application - worship, then, MUST be based in TRUTH. It must BE SINCERE, not fake or hypocritical. It must speak the truth - tell about that which is real. And it is practiced not just in private, but particularly in community - in the church

Conclusion:

But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4:23-24 NKJV)

So, let's pull all these things that we have learned about worship together, and ask, "what does it look like? What should it look like here at Friendship Bible Church? And what should it look like in our daily lives as believers?"

Some observations:

1. Worship should permeate.

If it springs from within... Our spirit in step with his spirit, it just bubbles out everywhere. Notice *verse 14*

Bowing before, acknowledging the worth of, WORSHIP, in other words, is not something we turn on for a day and then off for the week. It is always on.

Our challenge is to incorporate worship 24 x 7, and not just on Sunday.

Our challenge is for worship to permeate. Worship while living our daily lives. Worship while at home. Worship all week. Worship while at work. Worship while on Facebook. Worship while on the softball field. Worship everywhere.

Worship should PERMEATE.

2. Worship should proclaim.

If truth is a central component of worship, then all our worship must proclaim that truth.

May our words, our songs, our literature, our behavior, all point to the truth.

Worship should PROCLAIM.

Well, as I said in the introduction, this series took a different direction than I had originally planned. Got had something in mind that I did not, and so I trust this has been helpful in ways I did not foresee.

May God teach us to worship!

Everywhere and every day. *for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. (John 4:23)*

Chapter 16. Your King is Coming To You

READ - *Matthew 21:1-11*

TEXT - *Tell the daughter of Zion, Behold, your King is coming to you, Lowly, and sitting on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Matthew 21:5 NKJV)*

THEME - Your King is coming, and is now offering you citizenship in His kingdom.

Introduction:

Here is a passage we read every year at this time. It is Palm Sunday, the traditional church observance of the historical event we just read about in our text. Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, proclaiming Himself the King, while crowds flocked and praised and welcomed Him

We often try to picture what it must have looked like. The Bible gives some interesting details:

- There was a big crowd (*vs. 8*)
- They spread their garments in the road before Him (*vs. 8*)
- They spread palm branches in the road before Him (*vs. 8*)
- There was a lot of singing and shouting (*vs. 9*)
- The crowd stretched out in front of Him, and behind Him (*vs. 9*)
- It was a moving procession, for He was riding into Jerusalem.
- When He arrived in Jerusalem, the entire city was stirred up and involved in the event (*vs. 10*)
- He, nor His disciples needed to say a word of introduction, for the crowd following Him were telling all who could hear, "THIS IS JESUS!"

It must have been quite a scene. We always approach this day in a celebratory way, here. The palm branches add a festive air to our service. The chosen music usually reflects celebration and rejoicing and joy, for that was the general air of the day.

And why would we not celebrate? The King is coming! That was the cause of celebration then, and it is the cause of our celebrating today. Do you get it? Do you believe it? Do you understand it? THE KING IS COMING?

The King is Coming.

They understood the prophets just fine. It had been foretold for many years.

The prophet Daniel had spoken of the coming King and kingdom:

Daniel 2:44 And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.

Daniel 7:13-14 I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. 14And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.

The prophet Micah had spoken of it:

Micah 5:2 But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.

Zechariah had foretold it:

Zechariah 6:12-13 And speak unto him, saying, Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Behold the man whose name is The BRANCH; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD: Even he shall build the temple of the LORD; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.

ILLUS - In Jesus' conversation with Nathaniel, we clearly see a man who was expecting a coming king - *John 1:49 Nathanael answered and saith unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel.*

ILLUS - When Jesus ascended to heaven after His resurrection, the disciples betrayed their expectation for a king in their question, *"Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6 NKJV)* And Jesus didn't deny their understanding of Him as King, nor did He deny the truth in their question, that there was, indeed, coming a kingdom. Jesus was ever a teacher of and lover of truth, and He never allowed His disciples or anybody else to believe a lie. To the Pharisees, He once said, "Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God." If the disciples were in error about the kingdom, He would have corrected them, rather than allow them to continue in an erroneous belief. He DIDN'T correct them, though. He simply pointed out that the answer was not known YET, and that God would reveal it in His time. (cf. *Acts 1:7 - And He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority."*)

IN OTHER WORDS, Jesus confirmed the kingdom was coming... just not YET.

They understood the Bible prophecies well, and therefore they rejoiced to see Jesus riding into Jerusalem, precisely fulfilling prophecies related to the coming King and coming kingdom.

The King is Rejected

Of course, the celebration ended, and we know that. Read on in Matthew, and you'll see that the smiles of the crowd quickly faded. The scene turned from sunshine to darkness, and from joy to sorrow. The celebration of this day gave way to the crucifixion of Good Friday. We'll talk about that some more this coming Friday, and I hope you'll join us.

The King was rejected!

READ - *John 19:15-22*

That passage well illustrates the rejection that occurred. Consider the thoughts - the King of the Jews... We have no king but Caesar... Say not... Say "He said..." What I have written, I have written...

Of course, Jesus had predicted this response, hadn't He?

He wasn't surprised by the rejection - *John 2:25 (He) had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.*

Luke 18:8 (NKJV) ... when the Son of man comes, will he really find faith on the earth?

Now it is common for Christians to look with some disdain on those who rejected Christ. We sense it in ourselves, don't we? We feel a discomfort rise up within when we read of this crowd turning against the Savior and shouting CRUCIFY. Don't we? Don't we find ourselves thinking, "I wouldn't have done that. I would have been one of the handful who stood faithfully at the foot of the cross, never leaving Him... never turning on Him.

But these were not some abnormal or unrepresentative group. They were people like you and me. What they did, you and I would have done, too.

ILLUS - A couple years ago I was attending a men's Bible study at a restaurant in Hartville. It was about the time of the election of our current president, and a lively discussion circled the table concerning whether this president would have gotten us into a war in Iraq, as the previous had done. After a few minutes of heated debate, a pastor softly spoke up and said, "The 3 most trusted intelligence agencies in the world, American, British, and Israeli, all agreed that there was evidence, and that we must go to war. It would not have mattered who was in office - we would have gone to Iraq."

So, too, it is not relevant who was in the crowd, or who turned and rejected Him shortly thereafter. You and I would have done it, too. You and I would have been operating with the same information, and we would have responded the same way.

SONG - How Deep the Father's Love For Us, by Stuart Townsend:

Behold the man upon the cross
My sin upon His shoulder
Ashamed I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers
It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished
His dying breath has brought me life
I know that it is finished.

Does not that lyric "Ashamed I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers" haunt you? Does it not remind us that we are no different, and that we would have joined right in in rejecting the King?

I wonder, this morning, as we ponder Him riding into Jerusalem and proclaiming Himself King - I wonder how many of us treat Him as a King now... how many of us really set Him on the throne of our lives? How many of us rather reject Him - either ultimately, by not even accepting Him as our Savior, or more subtly, by our lack of surrender to His will and reign in our daily lives?

The King was rejected. How many of us are still rejecting Him today?

YOUR King is coming.

Every year we look at these same texts and look at the Palm Sunday account in a slightly different way. It never ceases to amaze me how many times we can read a verse from this amazing book, the Bible, and see some new and wonderful nuance of truth in it. This year, as I read the text, one little phrase jumped out at me. It's in vs. 5 - *Tell the daughter of Zion, Behold, your King is coming to you.... Did you see it? Your King is coming to you.... Your king. YOUR King.*

As I read this text and pondered those words, suddenly the passage became very personal. MY King is coming. It would be easy for us to read this as a quaint and interesting historical narrative, 2000 years removed from us. But that phrase thunders in my brain this morning - YOUR KING IS COMING TO YOU.

He is My King. And He is COMING!

Such was and is His promise to you and to me.

John 14:1-3 Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

Acts 1:11 Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.

Oh, brothers and sisters, this ride into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday was an illustration... a precursor to a day when Jesus will once again ride in and declare Himself King. But the next time it will not be symbolic. The next time it will not matter the response. The next time, He will declare Himself King, and set up a Kingdom that will never wane in power. When He comes the next time He will look dramatically different!

READ - *Revelation 19:11-16*

No donkey when He comes - this time a white war horse. No meekness or extended hand - this time He judges and makes war. (vs. 11) This time His eyes will be like a flame of fire (vs. 12) and this time He will be surrounded by the armies of heaven (vs. 14) and this time, He will not meekly follow His enemies to a cross and surrender there to the nails in His hands and feet - this time He will strike the nations (vs. 15) and He will rule them with a rod of iron (vs. 15). This time He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God! (vs. 15)

When He comes the next time, He comes as KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS (vs. 16)

Conclusion:

And so, we see the familiar Palm Sunday story - with the familiar truths - The King is coming... the King is Rejected... YOUR King is coming to you.

To my mind, there is little doubt that the most interesting part of the story was not the donkey, or the palm leaves, or the strewn garments. The most interesting part was the reaction of the crowd... how they responded to the claims of Christ... what did they do about it?

And such is the most important aspect this morning, as well. He is YOUR KING. He is COMING! What will you do about this?

You could choose to ignore it, I suppose. Many do that today. Day after day comes and goes... week after week... Sunday after Sunday... and yet despite hearing that the King is coming, and coming for them, many just simply ignore the message. No response.

But ignoring reality never works. When He comes nobody will be able to ignore it.

ILLUS - My son was diagnosed with cancer some months back. I first heard the news of that while hunting in the woods on my brother's property in southern Ohio. Last year he and I hunted that property together, praise God, for the Lord saw fit to heal him of that cancer and give him more time here. I took him to the very tree where I was sitting when I got the call and showed him where I was sitting when I heard my wife's frantic phone call, "Joshua has cancer. You need to come home now." It's funny how I didn't think,

even for a minute about ignoring that truth. Denial was not an option. I got up... packed up... and drove home as fast as I could. If I HAD chosen to ignore it, the fact of his cancer would not have changed. You simply cannot ignore reality. It is not a valid choice. It is idiocy.

And yet, many still ignore the coming of their King. He is YOUR KING, and He is coming. You dare not ignore it.

You could choose, as did so many that first passion week, to reject your King. But that's not really an option either, is it?

ILLUS - In Mel Gibson's Braveheart, there is an interesting scene where William Wallace stands before the tribunal and is accused of rejecting his king. "Never once," spat Wallace, "did I ever declare allegiance to him." "It matters not," said the tribunal, "he IS your king."

How silly people are, to think that if they ignore the reality of Jesus Christ, and His claims on their life, He will just go away. "If I ignore it it won't happen!" LUDICROUS! And yet it's a common... perhaps THE MOST common reaction to the coming of the King.

ILLUS - In the rock opera "Beethoven's Last Night" by the Trans-Siberian Orchestra, there is a song sung by the character Mephistopheles. The haunting lyrics describe the way so many deny... reject the truth about death. I suggest that it's also an illustration of how many reject the reality of the coming King:

SONG - Trans-Siberian Orchestra - Mephistopheles:

ALL OF YOUR LIFE NOW

YOU HAVE DENIED

THERE'D BE A TIME

WHEN YOU'D EVER DIE

STILL IT'S BEEN RUMORED THIS THING MUST BE

AND NOW YOU CLAIM YOU ARE NOT PREPARED

SO MUCH TO DO YOU CAN NOT BE SPARED

STILL YOUR ENTREATIES DEATH WILL NOT HEAR

THE GRAVEYARD IS FILLED WITH IMPORTANT MEN

WHO COULD NOT BE SPARED BUT WERE IN THE END

AND SO I WHISPER NOW IN YOUR EAR

Rejecting the truth doesn't change it. YOUR KING is coming.

ILLUS - A short time ago I was driving west on Waterloo Road, heading out of Randolph. One of our deputy sheriff's was parked in front of the ball fields on Waterloo Road. I ignored him. A fact which didn't faze him in the least as he pulled out and switched on his lights. I pulled over and listened to him describing my speed infraction. I wonder how he would have responded if I had said something like, "I reject your claim over me. I do not recognize you as my sheriff." Do you think it would have gone well with me? I might have found myself arrested and standing before one of our honorable Portage County judges. How would I have fared if I had said, "I reject your authority over me. I do not recognize you as a judge?" I think we all know how such a response would have fared.

No... ignoring the coming King is impossible. Rejecting Him is nonsense. There is only one valid option - prepare for His return.

He came that first time and surrendered to the death of the cross. He then went back to heaven from whence He now waits patiently, for your response. This is the amnesty period, where all who want to enter the kingdom may do so. He stands with nail-pierced hands outstretched, offering citizenship in His kingdom to all who will take it.

Each day you wait though, is one day less when you might respond. One day less when you CAN respond. One day less when the Savior holds out His bleeding hands in entreaty, and one day closer to His return on a white war horse to destroy those who reject Him and close the door to the kingdom.

On this Palm Sunday, 2011 - what will your response to the coming King be? Will you ignore Him? Will you reject Him? Or will you take advantage of the offer He now makes and become part of His kingdom before it's everlastingly too late?

You must choose. And you're running out of time.

Chapter 17. Why Darkness?

(A Good Friday Devotional)

READ - *Luke 22:39-54a; 63-71; 23:1-5; 13-46*

TEXT - *Luke 23:44 Now it was about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. (NKJV)*

THEME - Our salvation was wrought on the cross, in the darkness, when God poured out His wrath on Christ, our substitute.

Introduction:

Why Darkness?

Why did Jesus say, "*This is your hour, and the power of darkness?*" (*Luke 22:53*)

Why did darkness cover the entire earth for 3 hours?

If you are one who doubts the Bible, here is a historical event to which other historians also attest.

QUOTE (David Guzik) - "Origen and Eusebius quote words from Phlegon (a Roman historian) in which he makes mention of an extraordinary solar eclipse as well as of an earthquake about the time of the crucifixion." (Geldenhuis in his commentary on Luke) Phlegon, Roman historian wrote this: "In the fourth year of the 202nd Olympiad, there was an extraordinary eclipse of the sun: at the sixth hour, the day turned into dark night, so that the stars in heaven were seen; and there was an earthquake." This is especially remarkable because during a full moon - which Passover was always held at - it was impossible that there be a natural eclipse of the sun.

So it was not natural... it was supernatural... God (or some believe, Satan) brought a darkness over the entire earth. If Phlegon is to be believed, it was a total darkness - dark enough to see stars at noon.

Why the darkness?

It is true that if we take Christ out of history, there is only darkness.

No hope... no light... no future...

Proverbs 4:19 The way of the wicked is like darkness; They do not know what makes them stumble.

The Bible makes it clear that, apart from Jesus, the world "*wandered in darkness.*"

It is ALSO true that Jesus brought light into this hopeless darkened world.

Isaiah 9:2 (NKJV) The people who walked in darkness Have seen a great light; Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, Upon them a light has shined.

Isaiah 29:18 (NKJV) In that day the deaf shall hear the words of the book, And the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity and out of darkness.

John 8:12 (NKJV) Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.

John 12:46 (NKJV) I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness.

Do not these truths make the darkness of interest here? Why the darkness? Dare we skip over this verse, which we often tend to skip over? Or should we spend some time thinking about it, this evening?

The Battle Was Fought in the Dark!

G. Campbell Morgan, in a great sermon entitled "The Darkness of Golgotha" made the point that what happened there in the dark is the central thing - the most important part of the story.

If so, we need to have some understanding of what happened during the darkness. WHY THE DARKNESS?

Perhaps Matthew's account helps -

READ - *Matthew 27:45-46*

The darkness came as God turned away... forsook His only Son.

When Jesus was crucified, the physical suffering was undoubtedly terrible. But the severed relationship with God... the fact of being forsaken by God, was worse. He never complained of the physical suffering on the cross! He cried out in agony to see God turn away from Him. And that's what Matthew tells us happened during those hours of darkness.

ILLUS - Martin Luther sat contemplating these words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" For a long time, without food or water, he sat in deep meditation reflecting on this saying of Christ. After a long time he rose from his chair and exclaimed in utter amazement, "God forsaken of God! Who can understand that?"

You see, an astonishing transformation took place on that cross, in that darkness.

God took every sin that had ever been committed... every sin that ever would be committed... past, present and future... every evil thought, every adulterous act, every murder, every hate, every anger, every lie, every theft, every pride, EVERY SIN... and laid them on Jesus.

SONG - All my iniquities on Him were laid. He nailed them all to the tree. (LOOK UP)

QUOTE (MacArthur) - The Bible says, Hebrew 4:15, "that Jesus Christ was without sin." This is true. Personally, He never committed a sin, never a sinner. But this was still a judgment on sin. If not His sins, whose? 1 Corinthians 15:3, "Christ died for our sins." Romans 4:25, "He was delivered for our offenses against God." 1 Peter 2:24, "Who, in His own self, bore our sins in His body." 1 Peter 3:18, "Christ suffered the just for the unjust." 1 John 4:10, "God sent His Son to be the atonement for our sins." Galatians 3:13, "He was made a curse for us."

But the transformation didn't stop there. It went further. 2 Corinthians 5:21 - Made Him to BE sin for us, who knew no sin...

He not only BORE our sin on that cross. In God's eyes, He BECAME SIN. That's a mind stretching thought, isn't it?

From our perspective, that is awe inspiring... humbling... wonderful, even, for it means the cross becomes a place of deliverance. Our sin died with Him on that cross.

But from God's perspective... He had no choice but to turn away.

Habakkuk 1:13a (NKJV) You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, And cannot look on wickedness.

On that cross, Jesus was MY SIN!

On that cross, Jesus was YOUR SIN!

And God must judge sin! And there, in the darkness, on that cross, God's wrath and judgement poured out on the Savior... the One who carried our sins... the One who had BECOME our sin!

QUOTE (MacArthur) - ... the Bible uses darkness as a symbol of judgment... Isaiah speaks of darkness as a sign of judgment a number of times, Chapter 5, Chapter 13, and again in Chapter 60. Joel spoke of darkness as a sign of judgment. The prophet, Amos the prophet, Zephaniah, both spoke of darkness as signs of judgment. We find also Matthew, Mark, Luke, and in the Book of Acts, darkness is associated with judgment. We find it again in Hebrews 12, 2 Peter 2, and mostly notably in the Book of Revelation.

And God had to turn away. God forsook Him... God turned His back on our sin which was there on that cross.

O what a load was Thine to bear,
Alone in that dark hour,
Our sins in all their terror there,
God's wrath and Satan's power.

Conclusion:

Why the darkness?

Because whatever happened there during those three hours of darkness... whatever Christ suffered as His Father turned His face away... whatever it was that made Him cry out "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" was the ONLY WAY to save your soul... and to save mine.

Why the darkness?

Because - QUOTE - All of the wrath of God falls upon us, or upon our divine substitute.

Why the darkness?

QUOTE (G. Campbell Morgan) - Because He is God, and because God is love, and love is never satisfied with the destruction of a sinner, but with the saving of a sinner. That is why.

Luke 23:44 Now it was about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. (NKJV)

Well might the sun in darkness hide
And shut his glories in,
When Christ, the mighty Maker died,
For man the creature's sin.
(Isaac Watts)

When most in Satan's awful power,
O Lord, Thy suffering spirit seemed,
Then, in that dark and fearful hour,
Our souls were by Thy blood redeemed.
(Believers Hymnal, #433)

PRAY:

May we see it... understand it... recognize the price that was paid there...

May we love it... the horror of the cross is the source of our salvation. Because you turned away from Jesus, you need not turn away from us! *Colossians 1:13 (NKJV) He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, May we see the cross with the eyes of the man who said, (QUOTE - I am so bad that He had to die for me, and I am so loved that He was glad to die for me!)*

May we be changed by it... *Ephesians 5:8 (NKJV - For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light*

And may we rejoice, knowing that the story didn't end in darkness. There were 3 hours of darkness, and then there were 3 days in the darkened tomb, and then came the morning.

COMMUNION:

READ - Believers Hymn Book, # 435

Chapter 18. Questions Outside The Tomb

(An Easter Sermon)

READ - *John 20:1-31*

TEXT - *John 20:15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?"*

THEME -

Introduction:

ILLUS - Recently, I read the story of a Muslim in Africa who became a Christian. When his friends asked him why he made that decision, he told them, "Suppose you were going down a road, and suddenly the road forked in two directions, and you didn't know which way to go. Then you saw two men at the fork, one dead and one alive. Which one would you follow? I decided to follow the man who is alive."

We are here this morning because we have decided to follow the man who is alive, and that man is Jesus. Every Sunday morning Christians gather in celebration of the fact that Jesus is alive. That's why we worship on Sunday now, rather than on Saturday as the Jews did. Jesus rose on Sunday, which became known therefore as the Lord's Day. And we celebrate the truth of His resurrection every time we come to church on the Lord's Day. But today - Easter Sunday, is even more special - an even more focused time of worship and celebration for the One who died and rose again.

Some years ago my wife and I were privileged to visit Jerusalem. We saw wonderful things. We wandered the streets of the old city, which have changed little in the 2000 years since Christ feet traversed them. We visited places like Jericho, and Bethlehem and Megiddo and Capernaum. We watched people being baptized in the Jordan River, and we spent a beautiful afternoon gliding over the Sea of Galilee. But without question, there were two sites that were the highlights of the trip - Golgotha and the Garden Tomb.

Now there is some dispute about just where the tomb was, and to be honest, nobody really knows for sure. The Catholic Church of the Holy Sepulchre is built over top of what Catholics believe to be the tomb. We visited there, and were taken down underneath the massive church building into what seemed a dungeon underneath. In the middle of the room was what appeared to me to be a coffin. Nothing about the site matched anything we've read here today. There is another site, though, which seems much more likely. It is called the Garden Tomb, and is a truly wonderful place. The facsimile you see behind me was modeled after pictures of that tomb. And while, again, we cannot be certain if either site is the genuine site of the empty tomb, the Garden Tomb certainly fits the scriptural account more accurately. (DESCRIBE SOME DETAILS)

Of all the things I remember the most about that tomb, though, one stands out. Our British guide, as he drew his presentation to a close, motioned toward the open tomb and said, *Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. (Matthew 28:5-6)* Of course, he was just quoting *Matthew 28:5-6*, but in that context, it was powerful. I've never been able to read those words since without seeing that empty tomb in my mind's eye.

That is, of course, the wonderful truth that we would proclaim to you, this Easter morning. The tomb was empty... and Jesus is risen, just as He said.

We read one of the resurrection accounts this morning, that in *John*. Perhaps some questions arose in your mind as you followed along with that reading. Some certainly arose in mine. This morning let's consider

some questions WE might ask if we were there... standing outside that empty tomb on that first Easter morning. And then let's notice a couple of questions that WERE asked outside that tomb.

Questions WE might ask.

1. Where was the stone?

Our Friendship Trio sang about it this morning - "Day three His body's missing! The stone was rolled away!"

That's what we read in *vs. 1 - the stone had been taken away from the tomb.*

Now one of the things I remember about the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem was that there was a very pronounced trough carved into solid rock in front of that tomb. The trough was where the stone would have rested. The trough was sloped so that the stone would roll into place and seal the opening of the tomb. It would have been massive - much too heavy for a man to move by himself.

ILLUS - I have been doing some cleanup on my property. There is a block of concrete lying in my yard, which has been there for many years - a left over remnant from an old farmhouse that was there. That block of concrete is very similar in size to the stone in our model, behind me, this morning. While trying to clean up that area of the yard, I decided to try and move that stone. Yeah, right.

The stone was huge... massive... and very very heavy. And it was not in front of the opening. As a matter of fact, some say it was nowhere near there. Josh MacDowell has an interesting section in his book, "Evidence that Demands a Verdict" in which he discusses the various words used by the gospel writers to describe the moving of the stone. Here in John, MacDowell says the Greek word used in *vs. 1* actually means the stone was tossed some distance from the tomb.

Interesting. You see, another thing I remember about the garden tomb is that there IS no stone there. The stone is missing.

Perhaps this means little to you this morning, but it would have meant something to those seeing it for the first time. It would have raised serious questions. What in the world happened to the stone? It would have appeared miraculous... supernatural.

That stone, which *had been taken away from the tomb*, was compelling... it was evidence...

2. What was the deal with the grave clothes?

Notice *vss. 5-9*. Five verses devoted to what Peter and John saw when they looked into the tomb. They saw the graveclothes lying there.

Remember what Mary thought - somebody had taken the body. (cf. *vs. 2, 13, 15*). But those grave clothes made that highly unlikely... basically unbelievable.

QUOTE - You see, the fact that the grave clothes were still there showed that this was not a human event. Only God would have left the grave clothes. John doesn't record it, but the other Gospel writers record that the angel told Mary, "Look, you can see where He lay because the grave clothes are there." It was obvious that Jesus wasn't there because the grave clothes were there, and very likely they still had the same shape Jesus had. The face cloth was taken off. Remember, these grave clothes are essentially strips of linen that were soaked in spices and then wrapped around and around each finger, both arms, the toes, and the feet. Every part of the body was bound up in these grave clothes. That is why, when Lazarus came out of the grave, Jesus said, "Loose him and let him go." They had to take those grave clothes off, somewhat like removing a cast from a broken arm when they used to use the old plaster casts which I guess they still use some today. So to say that the grave clothes were lying there was a

significant statement. First, that would not be the way that you would do it if you were hurriedly stealing the body. Secondly, it gave a visible demonstration that Jesus was not there. The fact that the grave clothes were there accentuated the fact that Jesus was not there.

Perhaps you struggle to believe that Jesus actually rose from the dead. Perhaps that is a bit too supernatural for you. Consider the question, though - what is the deal with the grave clothes? If there is some natural explanation for Jesus' body being missing from the tomb that morning (and that is a fact that is beyond dispute anywhere in history), why this interesting fact about the grave clothes?

There is a lot of conjecture about these clothes. Some teach, and I have even said so myself in the past, that there is evidence that the clothes were lying exactly as they would be if the body had simply vanished from within and they had collapsed in on themselves. It's interesting, but it's not really demonstrable from the Scripture, itself.

The thing was, the clothes were there, and the body was NOT. That was what they demonstrated. It doesn't really matter what they looked like. What matters is that they were THERE and the body was NOT.

That's what the disciples saw when they looked in there. It was compelling... it was evidence... it was unexplainable by natural means.

Those are just a couple of questions we might have asked had we been there. I'm sure there would have been others, as well. It was the single most miraculous event in all of human history. We, like the disciples, would have been dumbfounded by it.

But the questions I want us to concentrate on this morning were asked, not by the disciples, but by the risen Lord, Himself.

Questions HE asked.

Let's fast forward now. Mary has arrived at the tomb to discover the stone is missing, as is the body of the Lord. (vs. 1) She has run to tell Peter and John of this, assuming somebody has taken the body (vs. 2). Peter and John run to the tomb (Peter getting lapped by John in the process), and they examine the empty tomb, finding the grave clothes lying there, but the body missing (vss. 3-9). Peter and John, after seeing these things, do something very interesting. They go home. (vs. 10)

Mary, on the other hand, did not go home. She stayed. She wept. She was still looking for the missing body of Jesus. She looked into the tomb again (vs. 11), and this time she saw two angels. She didn't seem at all alarmed by this, and even had a conversation with them. They asked her a question, "Woman, why are you weeping?" (vs. 13) She responded that she was trying to find the body of the Lord, which she believed somebody had taken away. (vs. 13)

Now let's stop there for a minute. If you were in the presence of two angels, wouldn't you be a bit awestruck? I think I would be. As a matter of fact, I believe this is one of the only places, if not THE only place, where a person was in the presence of an angel and gave no indication of fear. Usually, men and women were afraid in the presence of angels, and sometimes they attempted to worship them.

Mary's response? She turned her back on them and gave them not another thought! (vs. 14)

I suppose it could have been that she was simply overwhelmed with grief. It's hard for us to imagine the horrible couple of days the disciples of Jesus went through here. The day of the crucifixion must have been excruciating to those who loved Him. And the next day would have been one of complete fear. Her emotions would have been at a fever pitch. As a matter of fact, the word translated "weeping" in vs. 11 literally means loud, wracking, sobbing. Perhaps as the tears overwhelmed her, she turned away.

One of the church fathers had a different idea, though. John Chrysostom, who ministered in the 4th century, thought that as the Lord appeared behind Mary, the angels would have bowed down in worship, and Mary then turned to see to whom they were bowing. There is no Biblical evidence for it, but it's an interesting theory - that as she was speaking with the angels, suddenly they begin to bow down and she looks around to see to whom they were bowing down.

She *saw Jesus standing*. (vs. 14) Hallelujah. That verse makes me want to shout. STANDING. Not lying wrapped in clothes in a grave. Not stooping and broken by the Roman scourge, and not weakened and dying from the horrors of the cross. STANDING!!!

Well, then we come to the point I want us to see today - Jesus asked Mary two questions. (vs. 15) And they are questions we must consider ourselves, on this Easter Sunday 2000 years later.

1. Why are you weeping?

When Jesus asked the question, "Why are you weeping," Mary must have thought, are you crazy? How could I NOT be weeping? Mr. Gardener, were you under a rock these last couple days? It's been terrible! And after all they did to my Lord, now they've taken his body!"

But think about the question. Mary was standing outside the empty tomb, and weeping because it was empty!

The angels had asked her the same question. Now Jesus repeated it to her, "Why are you weeping?" In my mind's eye I can almost see Him smiling as He repeats the same exact question to her. After all, it is because the tomb was empty that she need never weep again!

Hear the question, this morning, Christian! "Why are you weeping?" In light of what Jesus accomplished that first Easter Sunday, we no longer have reason to weep, and we have every reason to rejoice.

Rejoice and be glad!
The Redeemer has come!
Go look on His cradle,
His cross, and His tomb.

Rejoice and be glad!
It is sunshine at last!
The clouds have departed,
The shadows are past.

Rejoice and be glad!
For the blood hath been shed;
Redemption is finished,
The price has been paid.

Rejoice and be glad!
Now the pardon is free!
The Just for the unjust
Has died on the tree.

Rejoice and be glad!
For the Lamb that was slain
O'er death is triumphant,
And liveth again.
(Horatius Bonar)

Why are you weeping? Because of the resurrection we look forward to a day when we will never weep again!

Oh we may come across speed bumps in our Christian lives. Sometimes they may even loom large. Trials and tests come. Trouble comes. Pain comes. For some of you this last year has brought weeping. I have wept with several of you this year as you said goodbye to loved ones.

For some of you, the weeping continues even today. We have a whiteboard that we use every Wednesday evening to record prayer requests. Some of you who have never joined us for a midweek prayer meeting would be amazed to know how often you are prayed for. That whiteboard is way too small these days. We are working on a larger one, for the needs are many.

And all of us can expect periods of weeping in the future if Jesus doesn't return first.

Oh, but Christian, imagine the smile on the face of the risen Savior as he asked Mary, "Why are you weeping?" Because now, for us, weeping is temporary. And it is nothing compared to the joy that is ours because that tomb was empty!

Psalms 30:5 Weeping may endure for a night, But joy comes in the morning.

Revelation 21:4 And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.

Consider the question, this morning. "Why are you weeping?" Because if the resurrection is true - and it is - then we can laugh through the tears of this life, for eternal life is ours!

ILLUS - Martin Luther once spent three days in a black depression over something that had gone wrong. On the third day his wife came downstairs dressed in mourning clothes. "Who's dead?" he asked her. "God," she replied. Luther rebuked her, saying, "What do you mean, God is dead? God cannot die." "Well," she replied, "the way you've been acting I was sure He had!"

QUOTE - Just because we don't see him doesn't mean he isn't there.

Why are you weeping?

2. Whom are you seeking?

Who are you looking for, Mary? Are you really looking for a broken dead man? For He is not here. He is risen, as He said.

Whom are you seeking?

Perhaps a key to understanding Mary's behavior and attitude in this passage is seen in vs. 14 - *she did not know that it was Jesus.*

She was standing face to face with the risen Lord, and she didn't know Him.

She came to the tomb to DO something, but Jesus didn't care about that. He wanted her to MEET somebody. Because that was the key to it all! This Christianity thing - it's not about DOING anything! It's all about meeting and following a PERSON - Jesus Christ.

WHOM are you seeking?

You know why so many are living lives filled with weeping today... why so many are unfulfilled and wonder what life is all about? They don't know Him!

ILLUS - This past week the newspaper told the story of several girls who bashed another girl half to death in a MacDonald's Restaurant.

How can such a thing happen? Because they don't know Him.

ILLUS - It's difficult to read the newspapers these days because of the seemingly unending litany of terrible news.

How can people be so terrible to each other? How can such wickedness happen in our world? How can the news be so continually depressing and hopeless?

BECAUSE THEY DON'T KNOW HIM!!

And the sad thing is, it's not like He's hard to find, or hard to know. He was standing right in front of Mary. Right there - all the time she was weeping, He was right there. And He is right there for you, too - calling out to you.

Revelation 3:20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.

Jesus looked at Mary and asked the question He asks to all of us today - WHOM are you seeking?

As we picture Him standing there outside the empty tomb, we can imagine Him asking it in a slightly different way, can't we - "In light of what happened here, who else COULD you be seeking?"

Conclusion:

On this Easter Sunday in 2011, we who know Jesus as our Savior and Lord cannot help but rejoice over the significance of that empty tomb. We have the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. We're gonna live forever. We're gonna die no never. All because we know Him. We need never weep again!

What about you? I wonder how you answer the two questions Jesus asks of you this morning?

Why are you weeping? And WHOM are you seeking?

Do you know Him, this morning? Do you know Him?

If you do not... if you have questions... if you still wonder what it's all about - come to him today. *seek the Lord, while He may be found.*

I close today with the testimony of a modern day Mary Magdalene. Pastor John Piper shared this testimony recently, and I share it with you. It was simply entitled - Deb's story:

I grew up in an atheist home: I never went to Sunday School, we never went to church. And I lived life on my own terms without any reference to God.

I lurched from one disastrous relationship to another, looking for love in all the wrong places. And when I was thirty, I got involved with a guy who was five years younger than myself.

When I found out he was doing heroin, instead of leaving him I started taking heroin as well. That began an 18 month ordeal as I tried to come off the drug, but it is incredibly addictive; and life just went from bad to worse.

I was staying at a friend's flat, and I remember rummaging around in the drawers for some matches, because one way of taking heroin is to light a bit of it and inhale the fumes - it's called chasing the dragon.

And while looking for the matches, I found a little Gideon New Testament and while high on heroin I started reading this little New Testament. I'd never read the Bible before, and I just read there that I was in real trouble - that there was a living God to whom I owed an account for my life, this life that I had just trashed.

And suddenly I realised that I couldn't commit suicide - life was living hell, but death meant facing him, and I was too scared to do that. I saw in the Bible that I was in real trouble with a real God.

I didn't know who Jesus was, but I knew I had to get to a church. And so I went to a church service on Good Friday. I remember sitting right at the back of the church, near the door, ready to make a quick getaway.

But then they started reading from the gospel of Matthew about Jesus' crucifixion - and I just sobbed, because what I heard was that he had died on the cross for me. That all the things I had done and the punishment that was coming my way, he had taken on the cross - and when he cried out on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I realised that it was for me that he was forsaken. He had taken my forsakenness.

And I just sobbed. I just burst into tears. He'd done that for me so that I could be not forsaken - and I just knew that I was God's daughter.

I was sobbing, absolutely sobbing. I don't know what people thought, but I didn't really care, because I walked out of there knowing that God is my Father and life has just changed from that moment on.

That was nine years ago, and as I look back over the time that I've been a Christian, God has changed me from the inside out. I can see that God has healed and restored every single area that I had singlehandedly trashed. He has restored relationships with friends, and he's given me loads of new friends. He has restored me to my family. He has restored my career. He's helped me settle all that debt.

Where before, I lived life for myself and on my own terms, I see now that there's real freedom and real joy in living for God and on his terms. I love him with all my heart, my soul and my strength, and I love others, and for me that's what makes life worth living. And I can't thank Him enough for what he's done for me.

Mary didn't know Him. Deb didn't know Him.

But both came to know Him.

You can too. That's the gift of Easter. Don't miss out on it.

Chapter 19. Ask Me If I Care

READ - *Nehemiah 1:1-11* (BUT WAIT UNTIL POINT NOTED BELOW)

TEXT - *The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire. (Nehemiah 1:3 NKJV)*

THEME - The state of God's people is our problem, and we need to care, and we need to do something about it.

Introduction

QUOTE - The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity." George Bernard Shaw put those words into the mouth of the Rev. Anthony Anderson in the second act of his play *The Devil's Disciple*. The statement certainly summarizes what Jesus taught in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37); and it rebukes all those who fold their arms complacently, smile benignly, and say somewhat sarcastically, "Ask me if I care!" (Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *Be determined*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.)

Today, we start a new study in the book of Nehemiah. You might want to turn to it now, so you'll be ready to read along in a few minutes. Keep that phrase "ask me if I care" in your mind, too, for it will be important.

First, though, in starting a new study, there is some introductory material to consider. Toward that end, allow me to address 3 questions right at the start:

1. Nehemiah is in the Old Testament - Why study it? Don't we live in the New Testament?

During the last few years we've undertaken quite a few studies. We did a topical study entitled "What We Believe" to clarify some key doctrinal positions. We looked at the book of John, the book of 1 Timothy, the parables of Jesus (one of my favorite studies so far), and we just recently finished the book of Acts. If there is a common thread in these studies, it is that they are primarily New Testament studies. We do live in the New Testament.

Well, a couple of key points should help:

- *All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness... (2 Timothy 3:16 KJV)*
- *For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (Romans 15:4 ESV)*

Although I am of the opinion that we should spend a majority of our time in the New Testament, I am also convinced it would be a grave error to ignore the gold mine that is in the Old.

2. OK - so it's worth studying. Help me fit it into my understanding of the Old Testament then. Where does Nehemiah fit in the historical timeline of the Old Testament?

The history of the Old Testament could be quickly summarized as follows:

- *Genesis* - God created the world and all that is in it, including the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, who fell into sin, and took the whole world with them. From that point on, all have been lost in sin. Thankfully, *Genesis* didn't stop there. God had a plan to redeem His fallen creation. It started with a particular group of people. He set a man called Abraham apart because of his faith (cf. *Romans 4*) and promised to bless him and all the world through him. Abraham had a son, Isaac, and a grandson,

Jacob, who inherited the promises God had given Abraham. God changed Jacob's name to Israel, and the Jewish people, and the nation of Israel, trace their ancestry back to these three patriarchs - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel).

- *Exodus - Deuteronomy* - The descendants of Abraham found themselves in Egypt, due to a famine in their land. Eventually, they became slaves in Egypt and suffered great oppression for 400 years. God raised up a deliverer from among them - Moses, who was mightily used of God to bring judgement upon Egypt, in the form of 10 terrible plagues, at the conclusion of which, the Israelites were freed and Moses led them away from Egypt and toward the land He had long ago promised to Abraham. However, the Israelites sinned, and rebelled against God, and He barred their entry into the promised land and caused them to wander in judgement for 40 years.
- *Joshua* - At the end of those 40 years, Moses was dead, and his successor, Joshua, led the Israelites in the conquest of Canaan, the promised land. As the book of *Joshua* ends, much of Canaan was under the control of the Israelites, but not all of it.
- *Judges - Ruth* - A long period of time ensued during which Israel was in the land, but not always in control of the land. When the people were in submission to and obedience to God, He blessed them. But when they rebelled and turned away from Him, He allowed their enemies to oppress them. There was no king in Israel during these days, and the key phrase of the book of *Judges* is "There was no king in Israel, and every man did that which was right in his own eyes."
- *1 Samuel - 2 Chronicles* - the times of the kings. The people cried out to Samuel the prophet and asked that they be ruled by a king, like other peoples. God gave in to their request and Saul was anointed king. He was a failure and a disappointment, and God replaced him with David, who is arguably the greatest of Israel's kings. David, the sweet psalmist of Israel. David, the "man after God's own heart." Under David, the nation of Israel became great, and a power to be reckoned with on the world stage. His son Solomon succeeded him, and the kingdom expanded and enjoyed amazing peace and prosperity during his reign. Then Solomon died, and his son Rehoboam, who was a fool, was responsible for the kingdom of Israel splitting. The 10 northern tribes became the kingdom of Israel, and the 2 southern tribes (Judah and Benjamin), the kingdom of Judah. The books of *Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles* tell the long history of the many kings who rose and fell during the next several hundred years, in both the northern and southern kingdoms. The northern kings were all bad - none served the Lord, and all led the people of Israel further away from Him. The southern kings were mostly good, but some of them also led the people of Judah away from God.

At the conclusion of this period, God judged both kingdoms, and allowed them to be carried away by their enemies. The northern kingdom of Israel was captured by the Assyrians in 722 BC, and in 586 BC, with the sack of Jerusalem, the southern kingdom was carried captive into Babylon.

READ - *2 Chronicles 36:11-20*

- The history of Israel wasn't over yet, though. The Babylonian empire didn't last forever. None do. The Persian empire arose in its place, and in an amazing fulfillment of prophecy, Cyrus, king of Persia, decreed that the exiles could return and rebuild their land, their city and their temple.

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the LORD God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him an house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? The LORD his God be with him, and let him go up. (2 Chronicles 36:22-23 KJV)

And so, with the blessings of the king of Persia, people began to return to the land of Israel, and to their city - Jerusalem.

- *Ezra* - describes the first two waves of people who returned.

538 BC - Zerubbabel leads the first wave of returning Jews.

515 BC - Ezra, the priest, leads a second wave of returnees, and leads them in the rebuilding of the temple.

- *Esther* - somewhere around 474-473 BC, Esther and Mordecai rescue the Jews from Haman's plot to annihilate them.
- *Nehemiah* - 444BC - Nehemiah's request to Artaxerxes to return and rebuild the city and its walls

3. So... we have a reason to study it... and we have a general idea of its place in history... just one last question, then - What is the book of Nehemiah about, and what can we expect to get out of it?

This book describes Nehemiah's return to the demolished and rubble strewn city of Jerusalem, determined to rebuild the city walls. He will return. He will undertake the project. He will succeed. The book is, therefore, about BUILDING.

The book also describes, though, problems that he faced during that task. We will meet Sanballat and Tobiah, wicked rulers in Samaria who will give him nothing but grief. He will fight against them and win. We will see the tremendous obstacles presented by the project. He will fight against them and win. We will see him tempted by those who pretend to be sent from God. He will see through them and win. The book is about BUILDING, but it is also about BATTLING.

He will build the wall... he will battle enemies, but the book will not yet be done. He will then restore the Word of God to its rightful place, and the worship of God to its rightful place. He will not be satisfied with a BUILDING, or with victory in BATTLE. He will continue leading his people to become what they should be as a people dedicated to God.

The book is about BUILDING... BATTLING... and BECOMING.

Now that we have that background information in place, let's see where it all starts with this man.

READ - *Nehemiah 1:1-11*

In *chapter 1* we see that Nehemiah, while employed as cupbearer to Artaxerxes, king of Persia, learned of the disastrous condition of his homeland. (cf. *vss. 2-3*) He was heartbroken to hear of their state, and spent some time in mourning, in fasting, and in prayer. (cf. *vs. 4*) He then prayed a very particular prayer which is recorded for us in *vss. 5-11*. Perhaps we'll deal with it at another time, but for sake of time today I'll suggest you spend some time this week studying it on your own.

For our purposes this morning, I want to zero in on one particular request in his prayer, seen in the very last words he prayed - *let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. (Nehemiah 1:11 NKJV)*

You see, he had heard the terrible report about Jerusalem and its walls, and in his prayer, he was putting a plan into motion... a plan that we will see unfold throughout the rest of the book. He had decided that he must act. He must DO something about the terrible state of God's people, God's city, and God's name.

Now, I know I've bombarded you with a lot of information this morning, but let me make just two applications from this passage and we'll stop for today.

Application number 1 could be described by the phrase:

This Is Not My Problem

Notice the bookends of our passage this morning:

I was in Shushan the citadel... (vs. 1)

I was the king's cupbearer. (vs. 11)

QUOTE - The office of cupbearer sounds rather menial to us today, but this was not the situation. The office of cupbearer came about in ancient societies because of the danger that an emperor or king might be poisoned by some rival. The cupbearer was a trusted person appointed to care for and taste the wine to make sure it was safe before it was served to the king. Such a person was obviously highly esteemed and trusted to begin with. Because of his constant and regular access to the ruler, he naturally acquired influence far beyond all but a handful of other military leaders and nobles. Moreover, in some periods of history the title 'cupbearer' became more a title for one in a high position, like 'chief of staff' or 'cabinet minister,' than a functional definition. (James Montgomery Boice, "Nehemiah, An Expositional Commentary", p. 15)

If ever there were a man who could be considered too busy to be bothered with the things of God, it was Nehemiah. If ever there were a man who had a brilliant career and wonderful opportunities in this world, it was Nehemiah. He was IN THE PALACE. He served daily in the very presence of the King and Queen. He was a busy and influential man, at the top of his career path.

We would not have been surprised, would we, to find that he was too busy to care about the struggling people in Jerusalem so far away.

In preparing for this series on Nehemiah, I've read the book through multiple times. John MacArthur once said he always tries to read through a book 50 times prior to preaching a series on it. Well, I don't think I hit 50, but I'm sure I read it through 20 times, at least. I read it in the KJV, NKJV, NASB, NIV, ESV, NLT, Good News Bible, and The Message. Over and over, until I had it in my mind. And I've come away from that exercise convicted by this man, for he WAS NOT TOO BUSY TO CARE, even though if there ever were a man who could use that excuse, it was Nehemiah!

Interesting how it's always the busy ones God uses.

May God convict us this morning, if we view the need of our community... our families... our neighbors... for Christ, and say in our hearts, "This is not my problem."

May God convict us this morning, if we hear of the recent devastation in our own land from tornadoes and floods, and say in our hearts, "This is not my problem."

May God convict us this morning, if we read of the sweeping influence of Islam, a false and ruinous religion that is sending multiplied thousands to hell, and say in our hearts, "This is not my problem."

May God convict us this morning if we know that perhaps hundreds of people in this world slip into hell every single minute of the day, and we say in our hearts, "This is not my problem."

May God break our hearts today if we know that Jesus is coming back any minute now to catch away His church... His bride, and to judge those who are not His, and say in our hearts, "THIS IS NOT MY PROBLEM."

Application number 2 could be described by the phrase:

This IS My Problem!

The problem was real. cf. vs. 3

The fact that it was not occurring where he was, in the palace of the king, did not change the fact that it was occurring... it was a very real need.

ILLUS - Yesterday marked the start of our annual RRODAAT emphasis. I have a goal of reaching every single home... every single family... every single life in this town of Randolph, and give them the opportunity to know Jesus. And everytime I go up and down a street in our town, I am struck by the number who simply don't care about eternity... who are blind... who are mired in a meaningless life that means nothing and accomplishes nothing for eternity... who don't know the Savior and don't want to know. **THE NEED IN OUR TOWN IS REAL.** Your neighbors and mine are lost and going to hell. They are *"in great distress and reproach. The wall... is broken down!"* (vs. 3)

This IS my problem! It is OUR problem as a church. Are we too busy to care?

ILLUS - Yesterday evening Beth and I gathered with a few friends. While waiting for the burgers to grill, my cell phone rang. It was Bill, our sister Bonnie's husband, calling to inform me that Bonnie had gone home to heaven just a short time before.

ILLUS - Yesterday morning, during our men's prayer breakfast, we prayed for several who are going through serious serious serious health issues.

These stories all have something in common - these are our people... our brothers and sisters in Christ... and they are in the midst of pain and need. They are *"in great distress and reproach. The wall... is broken down!"* (vs. 3) The problem is real, whether it's happening in my house or not! God forgive us if we are too busy to care.

Nehemiah heard the problem, and his reaction sets the stage for the rest of the book. It shows us his heart. It shows us why God used him so mightily. He cared! He cared about God's name... God's city... God's people.

QUOTE - People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

Nehemiah cared enough to ask about the need in the first place (vs. 2 - *I ASKED THEM...*)

Because he cared, he WEPT, and MOURNED, and FASTED, and PRAYED (vs. 4)

He understood that these far off people were IMPORTANT. They were "souls for whom Christ died," as we might word it today. cf. vs. 10 - *YOUR servants... YOUR people...*

Because Nehemiah cared, he decided to DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. cf. vs. 11 - *let your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.* He planned to go to the king. He planned to ask a favor. The walls were down... the city was in ruins... and he was going to rebuild it... for the glory of God.

Conclusion

"Ask me if I care" is a common sarcastic reply uttered in jest today. But in closing this morning, I must ask it in all seriousness.

Do I care? Do YOU care? Do WE care? Do we see the problem? They are *"in great distress and reproach. The wall... is broken down! These are Your servants and Your people..."* (vss. 3,10)

Or are we too busy to care? Which response is mine? Which is yours? Oh how we need to see Nehemiah's heart, here, and learn from his response. As we embark on this study of Nehemiah, may God help us to have such a heart... may God help us to care.

Invitation

Some today need to confess, as Nehemiah did, the sin of carelessness. "I have been too busy Lord. Forgive me. I have allowed other things to crowd out the things that matter. Forgive me. The walls are down... people are in distress... and I have busied myself about trivialities that are of no importance. Forgive me."

Some today need to see Jesus in this story. In a way, Nehemiah is a picture of Jesus here. We were lost in sin... damned to an eternity away from God in hell. The walls were down... we were in great distress. And Jesus, seeing this, decided to DO something about it. He came and lived and died on the cross that we might be saved. Do you know what that's about? Have you allowed Jesus to rebuild the walls of your life and give you the gift of salvation He so wants to give?

Chapter 20. Please Send Me

READ - *Nehemiah 2:1-20*

TEXT - *And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it." (Nehemiah 2:5 NKJV)*

THEME - Caring alone is not enough... we must care enough to do something about it.

Introduction:

As *chapter 2* opens, we see that Nehemiah is still at Shushan the palace, still in the employ of the king as his cupbearer, and that four months have elapsed since he first heard of the despair in Jerusalem.

The four months that passed between *chapter 1* and *chapter 2* were not wasted time, though.

- During this time Nehemiah had been actively praying.

(cf. *Nehemiah 1:4,6*).

We looked at Nehemiah's prayer in *chapter 1* this past Wednesday evening during prayer meeting. I think the context supports the thought that Nehemiah didn't just pray once, though, but rather multiple times and for many days. His prayer was fervent, sincere, and repeated. We know from many promises in the Bible that such prayer gets the attention of God. (cf. *The prayer of a righteous person has great power... (James 5:16 ESV)*)

- During this time Nehemiah had been actively planning.

Although it would seem that the opportunity to approach the king snuck up on him, and he did not enter the king's presence on this day with the intention of discussing the situation in Jerusalem, it is clear from the text that he had been planning and preparing for just such an event. He had his request ready to trot out. (*vss. 3,5*) And, he had his needs formulated (*vss. 6-8*)

I think it would be accurate to conclude that during the four months between *chapter 1* and *chapter 2*, what had started as a deep concern in the heart of Nehemiah, had worked its way into his mind as a plan, and was about to burst forth into an action. Obviously, he had determined it was not enough to just weep about the need, or even just pray about the need. He had decided that somebody must go and DO SOMETHING about the need. And he had come to believe that that somebody was him.

That determination, and that decision, are summed up in our text - *vs. 5. PLEASE SEND ME.*

There are several things we can glean from this section:

Nehemiah's heart showed up on his face.

cf. *vss. 1-3*

We find Nehemiah still in the employ of King Artaxerxes, and still serving as his cupbearer. As he is serving wine to the king, just as he has done countless times before, something different happens. He appears sad in the presence of the king, and the king notices this sadness, and comments on it. (cf. *vs. 2*)

Now, it might seem a minor thing to us for a servant to simply appear sad before the king. How bad can that be? But it was apparently a very bad thing. It was a serious offense. We see it mentioned in *Esther 4:2* where Mordecai, in great distress over the plot to destroy all the Jews, *came even before the king's*

gate: for none might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. In other words, he could mourn right up to the gate, but not any further. Mourning... sadness... sackcloth... long faces, were not allowed in the presence of the king.

Nehemiah's fear is a pretty good indication of how bad an offense it was. He said he became "dreadfully afraid"... "VERY MUCH" afraid.

Nehemiah appears to me, in this book, to be a very thoughtful and calculating man. I think the four months that have elapsed since he first heard the news of Jerusalem's state have been spent in prayer and planning. I think he was looking for an opportunity to broach the subject with the king. But here in *chapter 2*, he seems to be caught off guard. He lets down his calculated guard for just long enough for a sad look to sneak onto his face, and suddenly everything is out in the open.

A lesson for us all is this - If it's in our heart, it has to come out!

For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. (Matthew 12:34 NIV)

There is no such thing as secret Christianity. It is not possible for something as mind altering, soul stirring and life changing as being born again to be hidden. It simply has to come out.

ILLUS - Joseph of Arimathea - *John 19:38 (KJV) And after this Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus.*

The concern that Nehemiah had shown in *chapter 1*... the care he had in his heart for his people, and for his God, and for their city, worked its way out of his heart and onto his face.

It SHOWED. And if we really care about the things of God... about the needs of our loved ones for the Savior... about the cause of Jesus Christ in our world... about the Kingdom of God - it will not and cannot remain a silent emotion buried in our hearts - it will show up, somewhere.

Nehemiah was busted. He was caught red handed... caught in the act of caring. The king saw it on his face and called him on it. Regardless of how he had planned this encounter, it was upon him now and he was going to face the consequences of his heart.

And so he shared his heart with the king (cf. vs. 3), just as Esther had shared a similar concern with her king 100 years earlier - cf. *Esther 8:6 For how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?*

Nehemiah's prayers reached God and the king.

cf. vss. 4-6

Now this was a very tense moment. From a worldly perspective, this king had all the authority... he had the power to help or hinder Nehemiah in his plans. He also had the power to punish Nehemiah severely, perhaps even with death, for daring to show a sad face in the presence of the king!

But one of the themes that comes out over and over again in Nehemiah is the sovereignty of God. While the king had power, God had the ultimate power and moved the king however He wished.

And Nehemiah knew this, and he showed it in his response - *prayed to God... and asked the king... (vss. 4-5)*

In other words, he employed a dual attack, or a two-pronged approach - pray to God, ask the king. Such a dual emphasis on man's part and God's part is seen throughout the book of Nehemiah.

READ - *Nehemiah 2:20, 4:9, 4:14; 4:17; 4:18; 4:20*

An application comes to mind - God is ultimately and always in control! This is a great thing to remember when we are tempted to get stressed out by the events taking place in our world!

ILLUS - Every sign seems to point increasingly to the decline of America as a power in our world. Everyday we hear gloomy economic reports about the American dollar and its diminished influence on the world stage. This one-time Christian nation no longer considers itself such, and just this past week a federal judge even ruled that Christian prayer was a jailable offense in Texas! Such things would be a cause of great concern to us, if we didn't remember that God is ultimately in control!

We need Nehemiah's balance in our Christian lives - respect the king, and rely on God! Recognize that the king is there at the will of God and to do the will of God.

ILLUS - Paul was so clear on this - *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. (Romans 13:1 ESV)*

Another application comes to mind - one related to prayer. We've already seen that Nehemiah was a man of prayer - a major portion of the first chapter records a specific prayer he prayed. But here he prays again, and I can't imagine he had much time to do so. I doubt seriously that he raised a hand to the king and said, "Oh king, live forever... I'd like to take a moment and go pray before I respond to your question... be right back."

No, there was no time for that... he was caught off guard. And yet, he says, *"I prayed to the God of heaven..." (vs. 4).*

A prayer of only a couple words is every bit as powerful as a lengthy one. "Lord help me!" is often all that needs to be said. Nehemiah had learned to be in communication with God ALWAYS... the lines were open... and when he needed something from God he could just shoot a sentence toward heaven and get a reply.

ILLUS - On Wednesday evenings we pray here. We split into groups and while some pray vocally, some choose to pray silently. There is no problem with either, but I know that there are some who choose to pray silently because they fear speaking up. They hear others pray long and seemingly eloquent prayers, and think they won't be able to compete. But the best prayers are short prayers. My soul is most blessed during prayer meeting when I hear a new voice speak up, perhaps with a single sentence, "Lord, thank you for your blessings in my life this week. Amen." GLORY! Such shots toward heaven produce results.

"I prayed to the God of heaven, and said to the king..." What do you suppose he said in that prayer? He only had a split second to formulate it and send it on. I think it was something like "GOD... HELP!"

And God helped.

ILLUS - My favorite prayer I've ever heard prayed was a fictional one. It occurred on the TV show "Happy Days". The Cunningham family was sitting down to Thanksgiving dinner. Tough guy, Fonzi, had been invited to join them, because Richie Cunningham had learned that Fonzi was alone and had nobody to celebrate Thanksgiving with. As they gathered at the table, Dad Cunningham said, "Fonzi, how about you saying grace?" Fonzi, whose character in the show was far from religious, seemed somewhat taken aback, but then he looked around the table, looked up to heaven, and said, "Hey God... thanks."

Nehemiah's CARING became GOING.

cf. vss. 9-10

We have a theme for 2011 at FBC - "Roots down, Fruit up". That theme is based on *Isaiah 37:31 (KJV)* *And the remnant that is escaped of the house of Judah Shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward:* What we're trying to do with this theme is to tackle topics, and implement programs, that take

us deeper into our walk with God and with His people, SO THAT we see more fruit in our lives... more souls saved... more lives changed... more sanctification and holiness in our walk with Christ. When the roots go down, the fruit will go up!

Last week we learned that Nehemiah CARED about the destruction and reproach of God's people and God's city (cf. *Nehemiah 1:4*). We see his heart again in today's reading (cf. *Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire? (Nehemiah 2:3 NKJV)*)

It all started in the heart of Nehemiah... it all started because he cared.

But here's the key to today's message - it would have gone nowhere if it STOPPED with caring. Nothing would have happened if the story had ended in *Nehemiah 1:4* and never made it to *Nehemiah 2:5*! Something had to be DONE. Caring was wonderful. But it accomplished nothing without DOING... it accomplished nothing without GOING.

It's interesting, isn't it, the dialog between the king and Nehemiah in *vss. 4-5* - "I see you have great concern about your people, Nehemiah - what do you want from me?" asked Artaxerxes. Now if Nehemiah had been like most American Christians today, his response would have been, "Send somebody to rebuild the walls!" "Oh king, you have great wall builders on staff here at Shushan, reassign somebody to fix this problem so my heart will stop hurting over it."

But Nehemiah's reply was not the typical American Christianity-style reply. Nehemiah, the cupbearer (a far cry from a wall builder), replied, "*I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it.*" (*vs. 5*) PLEASE SEND ME!

Oh church, how our families would change if rather than praying, "Lord, please send somebody to win my family" we would pray, "Please send me." Randolph would be won for Christ if we, the members of FBC would stop praying, "Lord send somebody to Randolph" and start praying, "Please send me!" The ravages of Islam around the world would be silenced if Christians in little churches would stop praying, "Lord send missionaries" and would start praying, "PLEASE SEND ME!"

I wonder, Christian, have you ever prayed that way? Have you ever knelt before God and said, "I don't know that my gifts line up with the needs here or not. After all, I'm just a cupbearer, but the need is great... and you are a great God... PLEASE LORD, SEND ME?"

ILLUS - Last year we partnered with several additional missionaries. We believe in missions here, because the Bible says, "Go ye into ALL THE WORLD and preach the gospel to EVERY CREATURE." (Mark 16:15) Some of you don't believe in that... you've told me so... but you will get your heart right one day when you get to heaven and see what God did with the missions support this little church gave. One of the missionaries we took on was a young man - not much more than a teenager, named John Stavropolous (sp?), with New Tribes Missions. John impressed us all with his heart to go. I'll never forget when, after his presentation, we opened the floor for questions, and somebody asked him, "How long is your commitment?" and John responded, "My commitment is for life." Hallelujah! Just this past week I received a post from John with two words - "IN MOZAMBIQUE!" He was rejoicing to share that he had, after much preparation, arrived on the field to which he had been called.

Christian, how many of us look at the beautiful missions display that Sister Sue created and maintains on the back wall, and pray, "Lord, send more missionaries?" And how many of us have ever prayed, "Lord, send me?" Why don't we pray that last prayer?

You see, caring is simply not enough. Caring needs to translate into doing... into GOING. cf. *faith apart from works is useless (James 2:20 ESV)* And I would add to that, that CARING apart from DOING SOMETHING ABOUT IT, is useless as well.

Of course, some who name the name of Christ simply don't care:

ILLUS - There is a large apartment complex across from the Kent Ridge assisted living facility in Kent. Some years ago, I and another brother, knocked on every single door in that complex. Actually, we did it several times, for we ran a church bus route through that complex. I remember knocking on the door of one apartment, and having a middle aged woman answer the door with an offended look on her face. When I managed to communicate who I was and what I was doing, she snarled, "I am already a Christian and am not interested," and slammed the door in my face. I have never forgotten her, or how richly she illustrated the attitudes of so many so-called Christians in our churches today "I am already a Christian and am not interested." Randolph is dying and going to hell! "I am already a Christian and am not interested." God help us.

ILLUS - Hezekiah was one of Judah's greatest kings. He was a godly man. But at the end of his reign, God sent Isaiah to him to warn him that the kingdom of Judah was nearing an end... the prophet told him that his kingdom would be captured and carried into captivity to Babylon... that "NOTHING WOULD BE LEFT". Hezekiah's response is one of the coldest and most uncaring statements in all of scripture - *2 Kings 20:19 (KJV) Then said Hezekiah unto Isaiah, Good is the word of the LORD which thou hast spoken. And he said, Is it not good, if peace and truth be in my days? WHO CARES WHAT HAPPENS TO THEM, AS LONG AS EVERYTHING IS OK AT MY HOUSE!!!!*

Sadly, some Christians just don't seem to care. But last week we learned that Nehemiah was not in that number - Nehemiah cared... and he cared enough to do something about it. "PLEASE SEND ME."

ILLUS - This past week we buried our sister Bonnie Robenstine. You know, she was one of the very last of the original Randolph Christian Church. Only a few remain - Mike and Susie... Debbie... Darlene and Richard... Jayne... Jan... maybe a couple others. I mentioned this in my remarks at Bonnie's funeral, but her church needs to hear it, too. Bonnie was one of only a couple of people in this church of 70-some, who ever participated in our "Reaching Randolph One Door At A Time" ministry. It wasn't because she was particularly gifted at it. Those of you who remember Bonnie know she was pretty quiet... didn't exactly speak up much. It wasn't because she was particularly good at it. My understanding is that she pretty much just tagged along and supported Beth as she talked with people. I think it was because she cared enough to do something about it. She cared enough to GO.

And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it." (Nehemiah 2:5 NKJV)

PLEASE SEND ME!

Conclusion:

Last week we closed with a question - "Do we care?"

This week let's add to that question - "Do we care enough to do something about it? Do we care enough to go?"

Will any among us, this morning, be as Nehemiah? Will any of us see the need... care about the need... and then say, "Please send me?"

Hark, the voice of Jesus calling,
"Who will go and work today?
Fields are ripe and harvests waiting,
Who will bear the sheaves away?"
Long and loud the Master calls us,
Rich reward He offers free;
Who will answer, gladly saying,
"Here am I, send me, send me"?

If you cannot cross the ocean,
And the distant lands explore,
You can find the lost around you,
You can help them at your door;
If you cannot give your thousands,
You can give the widow's mite;
What you truly give for Jesus,
Will be precious in His sight.

If you cannot speak like angels,
If you cannot preach like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus,
You can say He died for all.
If you cannot rouse the wicked,
With the judgment's dread alarms,
You can lead the little children
To the Savior's waiting arms.

If you cannot be the watchman,
Standing high on Zion's wall,
Pointing out the path to heaven,
Offering life and peace to all,
With your prayers and with your bounties
You can do what heaven demands;
You can be like faithful Aaron,
Holding up the prophet's hands.

If among the older people,
You may not be apt to teach,
"Feed My lambs," said Christ, our Shepherd,
"Place the food within their reach."
And it may be that the children
You have led with trembling hand,
Will be found among your jewels,
When you reach the better land.

Let none hear you idly saying,
"There is nothing I can do."
While the lost of earth are dying,
And the Master calls for you;
Take the task He gives you gladly;
Let His work your pleasure be;
Answer quickly when He calls you,
"Here am I, send me, send me."

-- Daniel March, 1868

Chapter 21. The Pierced Soul

Read - *Luke 2:21-35*

TEXT - *(yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed. (Luke 2:35 NKJV)*

THEME - To say "yes" to God is to invite pain, but the pain will be forgotten in the glory to come.

Introduction:

Happy Mothers' Day, ladies. May God bless every one of you, whether you are a mother, may be a mother in the future, or simply have a mother! Whatever state God has placed you in, know that you are special and beloved by God, and by your brothers and sisters and friends here at FBC.

It is traditional on Mothers' Day to preach a message somehow related to motherhood or womanhood, and as such we come today to a passage concerning Mary, the mother of our Savior.

In this text, we are introduced to Simeon, an elderly gentleman who just happened to be in the temple when Joseph and Mary brought the infant Jesus there. Clapping eyes on the Savior, Simeon had some very interesting things to say, mostly about Jesus, but also about Mary.

Before we consider Simeon's words, though, let's remind ourselves of some vital truths about this woman, Mary.

Mary was a woman just like any other.

Anytime we approach this wonderful character in our Bibles, we have to take a step back and correct some misconceptions. For although Mary was chosen by God for a unique role in history... although she was entrusted with a stewardship unlike any other before or after... she was, nonetheless, just a woman like every other woman sitting in this room this morning.

1. She was not born without sin, as some teach:

QUOTE (About.com - Catholicism) - "The Immaculate Conception refers to the condition that the Blessed Virgin Mary was free from Original Sin from the very moment of her conception in the womb of her mother..."

Of course, such is not the case. No such thing is taught in the Bible. Actually, just the opposite. If Mary was without sin, then an awful lot of errors are suddenly to be found in Scripture - "all have sinned..." "who can say he has made his way..." (BUILD UP)

2. She needed a Savior just like you and me:

"Neither is there salvation in any other..."

SONG - Mary Did You Know - the child that you delivered, would soon deliver you?

3. She is not to be prayed to.

Prayer is only to God.

Our Father, which art in heaven...

There is one God, and one mediator...

One day when we get to heaven we will meet this amazing and wonderful woman. We will spend time talking with her... learning all kinds of wonderful things. We will get to, finally, learn things about Jesus concerning which Scripture is silent - things like what He was like as a teenager! But what we will not do, is worship her. We will not be bowing to Mary, for we will join her in bowing to the only One worthy of worship - our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, having clarified these important points about her, let's see what Simeon had to say to her in vs. 35.

Mary experienced PAIN as His mother.

Verse 35 is a uniquely descriptive phrase, don't you think? I think a lot of mothers could relate. Sometimes the pain of motherhood can be described no better than that. It is a phrase that probably cannot be improved upon.

Mary, perhaps more than any other mother who has lived, experienced pain... soul piercing pain, as a mother.

NOTE - It's interesting that this phrase was not directed at Joseph, isn't it? They were both there (vs. 33), and Simeon blessed them both (vs. 34), but this particular prophecy - "*that a sword will pierce through your own soul also*" was directed only at Mary.

- One obvious reason - Joseph would not be alive to see it. The evidence suggests he did not live to see Jesus' earthly ministry. Jesus' words to John from the cross concerning Mary are difficult to understand if Joseph was still alive. There is no mention of Joseph in the Biblical narrative beyond Jesus' childhood years.
- One other reason - mother's simply feel things deeper.

QUOTE (Mom) - Men think, women feel.

What a descriptive and heart wrenching phrase is that? "*a sword will pierce through your own soul*" (vs. 35)

There are lessons in this for HUSBANDS: Let us not take part in things that will cause such pain - that will pierce her soul. Being the unfeeling brutes that we are sometimes, we forget that they are not like that. We are uniquely commanded to love our wives for a reason - feelings are less natural for men, and more needed by women. LOVE YOUR WIVES MEN.

There are lessons in this for CHILDREN: Don't let the devil use you to "pierce her soul".

ILLUS - Jesus NEVER talked back to Mary... NEVER smarted off... NEVER disobeyed... NEVER rolled His eyes... NEVER did things she would have been disapproved of behind her back. Evidence? cf. vs. 48-52. Also "*was in all points tempted... yet without sin...*"

I can see the wheels turning in your minds, now. "Wait a minute, preacher." If her husband was not the cause of her pain (and we could talk a lot about how much he must have loved her and supported her... Joseph is definitely an unsung hero in the Bible), and if Jesus never even rolled His eyes at her in disrespect... where in the world did this pain come from? Sounds like a cakewalk compared to what most mothers got through raising children!"

The pain Simeon was prophesying would take place at the foot of the cross.

QUOTE (Matthew Henry) - When he was abused, it was a sword in her bones. When she stood by his cross, and saw him dying, we may well think her inward grief was such that it might truly be said, A sword pierced through her soul, it cut her to the heart.

Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home. (John 19:25-27 (KJV))

Mary experienced PAIN as His mother, a pain the pierced her very soul.

Mary's pain could have been avoided.

Let's step back in time a bit, and read an earlier account in Mary's life.

READ - *Luke 1:26-38.*

Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." (Lk 1:38 NKJV)

Mary could have avoided the future pain if she would have simply not said yes to God. She could have said, "The social cost will be too high... what in the world will my friends think when I show up pregnant?"

She could have said, "I cannot do that to Joseph. It would not be right to hurt him like that. I think I'll pass on being the mother of the Savior."

She could have come up with any number of excuses to avoid saying YES to God. And any one of those "NO'S" would have saved her the pain of the cross.

It was a pain that could have been avoided.

But she didn't say NO. She said YES. And therefore, a sword pierced her soul.

Mary's pain was well worth it.

Hearing the crowd shout "crucify" about her Son must have been excruciating.

Watching as Pilate delivered Him up to their evil must have broken her heart.

Following in the crowd as He struggled to carry the cross down the Via Dolorosa must have been like receiving blows straight to the heart.

And standing helpless and mute at the foot of that cross, watching her beloved child, Whom she knew could have stopped the proceedings at any moment, GIVE UP His life... DIE... slump forward on the cross in death... well, I imagine that at that moment she knew exactly what Simeon meant about a sword piercing her very soul.

Yes, all of that pain must have been terrible.

But Mary also experienced resurrection Sunday! She also experienced seeing Him alive after His resurrection! She no doubt joined in the wonder the other disciples experienced at the birth of the church! She got to be in on the ground floor of the greatest thing the world has ever seen!

The last place we see Mary in our Bibles is in *Acts 1:14 - These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers. (NKJV)* After the pain, she saw the glory. She experienced the day of Pentecost... the 3000 saved on that day. She no doubt watched in amazement and wonder as the church, a direct result of what had caused her so much pain, spread like a sweeping wildfire across Jerusalem and Judaea.

Yes, the pain disappeared when she saw Him alive once again. The sword had, indeed, pierced her soul. But the result had been glorious and wonderful and WORTH IT... EVERY BIT WORTH IT!

Conclusion:

Let's make a few applications in closing, this morning:

1. Motherhood may be hard, but it is so worth it.

Moms, we honor you this morning. We do so recognizing full well the pain that being a mother can bring. We do so knowing that there may be times when you feel, as Mary did, that your very soul is pierced with the difficulty and demands of the task.

Moms, we not only honor you, though. We ask you to not give up. Oh how our world needs mothers!

2. Serving Christ may be hard, but it is so worth it.

Let's broaden our scope a minute... generalize. Mary's story has specific applications to motherhood, but it also has applications on a broader scale. After all, what Mary was asked to do was, on one level, no different than what all of us are asked to do - SERVE GOD.

And serving God is hard.

These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world. (John 16:33 KJV)

For verily, when we were with you we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know. (1 Thessalonians 3:4 KJV)

Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. (Acts 14:22 KJV)

Serving God is hard. We have seen first hand evidence of it here in this little church. People are being saved here. We will be baptizing two new believers in just a couple of weeks. In the last 5 years average attendance has increased 10 times here. God is working in the lives of His people - men, women and children are being added to His kingdom, and are growing daily in their relationship with Him. It is a wonderful thing to see!

And our adversary, the devil, HATES IT. He is FIGHTING AGAINST IT! Just ask any one of the many wonderful servants of God in this church. Ask them what has happened when they made a decision to stick their neck out for God. Ask them what happened when they raised their hand and said, "Here am I... I'll do it, Lord." Ask them what happened when they, like Mary, said, "Behold, the servant of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy word."

They will confirm - it has not been easy. Sometimes it has been hard.

QUESTION - "Preacher, are you out of your mind? Why would anybody want to be a Christian if these things are true? Why would anybody sign up for something like this KNOWING from the get-go that it is going to be so hard?"

ANSWER - "Why did Mary say "Be it unto me according to thy word?" Why did she say "YES" to God?

Because the glory that awaits will make the pain seem like nothing! That's why!

ILLUS - This past week, an amazing thing happened in our world. Although details continue to emerge, and we will probably never know all the details, it seems that

somewhere in the nation of Pakistan a group of US Navy Seals - Seal Team 6 - slipped silently through the night in stealth helicopters until they hovered over top a three story building housing the worlds most wanted terrorist, Osama Bin Laden. In the dark of night they slipped down zip lines into his lair, armed to the teeth with weaponry and high tech gear. They hit the ground and within minutes had cleaned out that compound, and rid the world of unspeakable evil. Everyone of those men will live the rest of their lives knowing that they accomplished something nobody else could... that they hit a level of achievement in the military world that is unparalleled. They will go down in the annals of history as heroes.

But all of them paid a price to be part of that. All of them went through years of hardship and training of the most rigorous kind. They watched as man after man washed out of the program because it was simply too hard. They endured the pain of a training regimen that was designed to break them, and weed out all but the select handful of men who could be the best in the world.

If they had not endured the pain, they would never have lived through the glory of this past week.

Oh church, let us say "yes" to God. Whether mothers, or fathers, or teenagers, let us say "yes!"

I wonder, have you ever knelt before God, and said, "Whatever you want, Lord, I will do?" Say it! "Wherever you want, Lord, I will go?" Say it! "Behold, the servant of the Lord, be it unto me according to your word?" SAY IT! If a sword must pierce my soul, then let it come! For that which is yet to come is so worth it.

For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. (Romans 8:18 KJV)

Oft times the day seems long, our trials hard to bear,
We're tempted to complain, to murmur and despair;
But Christ will soon appear to catch His Bride away,
All tears forever over in God's eternal day.

Refrain

It will be worth it all when we see Jesus,
Life's trials will seem so small when we see Christ;
One glimpse of His dear face all sorrow will erase,
So bravely run the race till we see Christ.

Chapter 22. See The Distress

READ - *Nehemiah 2:9-20*

TEXT - *Then I said to them, "You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach." (Nehemiah 2:17 NKJV)*

THEME - We can't move ahead for God until we first see the distress we are in... until we first see the need.

Introduction:

We last saw Nehemiah in Shushan... in the palace where he was in the employ of King Artaxerxes as cupbearer. We listened in on his conversation with Hanani his brother, when he learned of the dire straits of his people in Jerusalem. We saw his broken heart over their plight, and heard his prayers of concern. And we watched as those prayers became quite specific... when he came to know that something must be done, and that someone must go and that someone was him. We listened in on his conversation with King Artaxerxes, when he asked specifically, "Please send me" to Jerusalem that I might rebuild it. (cf. *Nehemiah 2:5*)

Well, that was then, and this is now. He is no longer in Shushan... he is no longer the cupbearer to the king... he is now in Jerusalem (*vs. 11*), and he is now the newly appointed governor of that region, with the authority, orders, and provision of the king necessary to accomplish the task of rebuilding the city and its walls.

Now, we see Nehemiah right at the beginning of his project. All the tears and concern and caring and praying and planning are in the past, and he is in the city... he can get started now. I considered entitling today's message "Right at the Start" for that is where we are - right at the start of his mission. But, for reasons which will become clear in a minute, I chose "See the Distress" as the title. Nonetheless, we are at the start, and there is much to learn from this beginning of the project.

Notice what Nehemiah did right after he arrived. After getting settled in, and perhaps dealing with the administrative issues surrounding the establishment of his new role as governor (*vs. 11*), he took a few trusted men (*vs. 12*) and toured the city under cover of darkness (*vss. 13-15*). He looked at the broken down walls, riding along what remained of the walls, and through the gates that were burned. He looked at the walls from inside the city and from outside. He viewed them from various angles. He got a good picture in his mind of their state, and of the scope of the project he was about to undertake.

Only then... only after he had seen with his own eyes the scope and size of the need, did he mention to the other city officials what he wanted to do (*vss. 16-18*). He described the problem to them, and then shared his commission from God and from the king (*vs. 18*). He gave a rousing speech (at least that's the way I imagine it. Only a bit of it is shared here... "Look at the mess we are in... we are a reproach... God has given us a job to do... let us build the wall..." (*vs. 17*))

Two things happened at that point, which we will see expanded upon in the rest of the book:

1. The people were rallied to the task and set to building. (*vs. 18*)

As we proceed with the story we will see that they weren't just talking about building - they really were fired up to get it done. They didn't stop at good intentions - in the very next chapter we'll see these people laying bricks, and building the wall. We'll see them accomplish it in a mere 52 days.

2. There was opposition. (*vs. 19*) Our friends Sanballat and Tobiah were a problem from day one. And we will see them continuing to oppose the work and throw problems in the path of Nehemiah and

the workers throughout the book. This opposition from outside forces will continue until the end of the book, and will be supplemented by other opposition from within the ranks of Nehemiah's own people. Opposition to the work is a theme that we will revisit over and over.

But the important thing for today is, the project was underway. He had arrived... he had shared his vision... and he had set the people to the task. The wall building project was underway. Good stuff.

Can we draw any applications from these events? Are there lessons for us here "right at the start" of this project?

I think there are.

When we undertake a work for God, there will be opposition.

Notice *vs. 10* - when Sanballat and Tobiah heard of his intentions to do this thing for God, they were "deeply disturbed," and immediately began to throw roadblocks in the path of the project.

ILLUS - David and his brothers / Goliath

ILLUS - In our recent study of the book of *Acts*, we saw Paul facing opposition nearly every place he went!

The fact is, when we undertake to do anything for God, we can expect opposition.

For some, opposition may appear before they are even saved, as family and friends try and dissuade from that decision. And others, long saved, may continue to experience opposition throughout their Christian lives, especially if they try and really stand up for Christ... live for Christ... do something of significance for Him and His kingdom.

Trust Christ... give your life to Jesus... be saved... find out what it means to be born again... to be born from above, and you will immediately find out what Nehemiah found out - there will be opposition.

ILLUS - Our brothers and sisters who have been saved out of Islam know what this means. Not long ago the news came out of a teenage girl in our area who was saved out of Islam. She had to flee her home to escape the "honor killing" that her father threatened her with. Such stories are apparently common around the world, even if we don't see much of them here. To trust Christ is to invite opposition.

Decide that you are going to stop playing church and get serious for God... decide that you will begin worshipping Him in real ways - with your time, talents, and treasure... begin SERVING Him... begin tithing... get SERIOUS with your faith, and you will experience what Nehemiah experienced - there will be opposition.

Now I don't think this point should concern us... I don't bring it up to frighten or discourage. It should, actually, steel our resolve! It did for Nehemiah!

As we continue our study in this book, we'll see that Nehemiah faced Sanballat and Tobiah over and over and over, but we'll never see him deterred by them... nor will we see him fearing them. His response toward them in *vs. 20* is classic and the first of many such responses - "We are doing what God wants us to do... He is with us... and you are not... you have no part in this, so hit the road."

I am resolved to enter the kingdom
Leaving the paths of sin

Friends may oppose me
Foes may beset me
Still will I enter in.

When we undertake a work for God, we can expect distractions.

Notice vs. 11 - *I came to Jerusalem and was there three days.*

Now I can't go too far with this thought, as it's implied rather than stated explicitly. But I can't help wonder what Nehemiah was doing for three days? Do you wonder that? He has been on fire to do this thing... he has risked his life and livelihood to approach the king and ask for this commission... he has been planning it for months... it has been the cause of hours and days of prayer and fasting.... And now that he is finally here, he lets three days pass before doing anything.

Well, this is just my conjecture, and it could be completely off base. But I imagine that as the new governor, he found himself greeted at the city limits by the other city officials. I imagine there was a round of glad handing and official functions to attend. I imagine there was a laundry list of transitional tasks that had to be accomplished.

None of these things would really fall into the category of opposition, like Sanballat and Tobiah. These were not evil or ungodly things. But they were distractions.

And in my experience, I've seen more people fall away from God due to distractions than to outright opposition.

Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world... (2 Timothy 4:10 KJV)

There are so many things that trip up Christians, and keep them from serving God to their full potential. Often these things are not evil or bad or sinful in and of themselves. But even good things can distract us. Anything that distracts us from doing what God wants us to do is a matter of concern.

We need to see the distress!

Nehemiah could not begin this project until he understood the need... until he had determined the scope... until he knew exactly what had to be done. So he saddled up and went out during the night and looked at it. I picture him looking at every inch of those demolished walls. I picture him dismounting at each gate, examining the charred remains of the gate. I picture him urging on his donkey as it struggles to pick its way through the densest rubble. I see him climbing up to high ground, and looking down at the broken walls. I see him kneeling at the foundations, trying to determine what was left, and on what he could build. Looking... seeing... He had to do that, before he could start building.

We need to see the distress we are in.

It's true of any endeavor isn't it? Some of you might have experience with project management, and you may have learned that you cannot undertake a new project without first defining the need and the scope of that project.

Jesus said, *For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? (Luke 14:28 ESV)*

We need to see the distress we are in.

1. You may be here this morning and know in your heart of hearts that you have never made a decision for Jesus Christ. You have been told that you need to be saved... you have heard it before... but you have never turned away from your sin and turned your life over to Him. I suggest that the problem is, you have not seen the distress you are in!

ILLUS - I have a dear friend who refuses to trust Christ. In unguarded moments, when pressed for a reason for such a refusal, I have heard him say, "I don't believe I need to be saved."

He walks through a life where the walls are broken down and the gates are burned with fire... he lives amidst rubble, but doesn't see it.

ILLUS - Media mogul Ted Turner once said (and I paraphrase, for I've misplaced the exact quote), "I'm told that Jesus died for me. He needn't have done that. I didn't ask him to, or need him to do that."

We need to see the distress we are in! Until you view the broken down walls of your life, you will never take action to fix them. Until you see how infinitely great is your NEED for the Savior, you will never TURN to the Savior. Until you see you are LOST, you will never be SAVED!

We need to see the distress we are in.

All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23 KJV)

There is none righteous, no not one... (Romans 3:10 KJV)

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. (Isaiah 64:6 ESV)

Who can say, I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin? (Proverbs 20:9 KJV)

ILLUS - Jesus was once asked about the greatest, most important, commandment. He replied *Love God with everything you have, and love people as much as you love yourself (my paraphrase) LOVE GOD WITH EVERYTHING YOU HAVE*. Oh that you would let that simple phrase burn into your mind this morning. And oh that I could get you to see how impossible it is to obey it! I cannot do it! You cannot do it! When I view that verse, I see the walls broken down and the gates burned with fire. I see my NEED! Do you see yours?

We need to see the distress we are in or we will never be saved! But seeing the need is the first step in fixing it. If you are lost... have never trusted Christ... don't have any hope of going to heaven someday... find yourself in a life surrounded by broken down walls and rubble - JESUS IS THE ANSWER! He can fix it... completely... forever!

2. You may be here this morning, and know in your heart that you were once saved. You remember a time when you came to believe you were lost. You remember a time when you called upon the name of the Lord and were saved. You believe... you know you believe... and you are convinced of your salvation.

But somewhere along the line you got off track. Your faith used to be more than just words... it used to include serving Jesus. You used to teach... or you used to play an instrument... or you used to sing... or you used to be a deacon... or you used to witness... or you used to read your Bible everyday... or you used to come out and help on church work days... or you used to tithe... or.... Just fill in the blank - your Christian life USED TO be more than it is today.

Somewhere along the line you got off track, and now your Christian life is buried in rubble and you find yourself surrounded by broken down walls and gates burned with fire.

We need to see the distress we are in, or we'll never get back to serving Him.

And many who name the name of Jesus Christ are living a life of broken walls and burned gates. Wasting away their lives on things of no value (wood, hay and stubble which will be destroyed), and squandering opportunities to live lives that matter for the kingdom.

"Yes, preacher, that is me. I won't say it with my outloud voice, but in my heart I know it's me. What can I do about it? What do I do about the walls which are broken down in my life? How do I get back on track?

ILLUS - Elisha and the floating axe head. (2 Kings 6:1-7) I remember Tom Malone preaching on this topic. He used it to illustrate what we are talking about. So you got off track somewhere? You lost your joy somewhere? You lost your closeness with Christ somewhere? Where did you lose it? GO RIGHT BACK THERE - THAT'S WHERE YOU'LL FIND IT.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9 KJV)

That's how you met Him in the first place, isn't it? That's the place where you found Him, isn't it? Well go back there. Kneel once again at the foot of the cross and confess. Pray, as you once prayed, "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner." Pray as David prayed, "Restore unto me the joy of my salvation."

You can do that, and He will restore you.

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. (James 4:8-10 ESV)

It can't happen, though, until you first see the distress you are in. Do you see it?

Conclusion:

Allow me to conclude with what could, possibly, be considered a fourth application from our text - You have to START.

Somebody had to exercise leadership and get things started. After all, what had the governors and priests and rulers been doing? They had been living amongst the broken walls apparently with no interest in fixing them or concern for their situation. But when Nehemiah said "let's build" they all said - go for it, we've got your back. When one stepped up and STARTED the ball rolling, others jumped inline.

Of course, we know this speaks to the importance of leadership - a fact that is true in the military, in sports, in business, in politics, and even in churches. It has been said, and Nehemiah is a wonderful reminder of it, that "everything rises and falls on leadership."

But when it comes to YOU dealing with the broken walls in your life, you cannot wait for somebody else to lead you. YOU must be the one to DO IT. YOU must trust Christ... YOU must decide to live for Christ... YOU must get started!

Friend... you who have never made a decision for Christ... do you see it today? The walls are broken down! Will you let Jesus rebuild them? Today? Before it's too late?

Christian... you who once were on fire and now are cold and indifferent and un-serving... do you see it today? The walls are broken down! Will you go back to where you got off track? Will you turn back to the only One Who can restore your life to what He wants it to be? Today?

Then I said to them, "You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach." (Nehemiah 2:17 NKJV)

Chapter 23. Walls Can Be Built

READ - *Nehemiah 3:1-32*

TEXT - (the whole chapter)

THEME - Walls CAN be built!

Introduction:

As *chapter 2* drew to a close, we heard Nehemiah's rallying cry to the people to rise up and build, for God was with him and them. (2:17) We also saw the affirmative and enthusiastic response of the people. (2:18)

In our text for today we see them what Nehemiah meant when he said that they *set their hands to this good work* (2:18). They got down to business and started building.

Now we here at Friendship Bible Church believe that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant, holy, and perfect word of God. We believe that every word is important. We base that belief on verses like *All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.* (2 Timothy 3:16–17 NKJV) We believe it based on Jesus' words in *Matthew - For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.* (Matthew 5:18 NKJV) (Or, as the ESV translates it *For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.*)

Admittedly, some passages are harder to read than others, and some can seem downright tedious at times. Our text could be considered such, as it is stock full of names and places. For some reason, I found it difficult to get anybody willing to stand up and read this passage today!

But if we boil it all down and look at what took place here, it can be summed up in a sentence - the people did what they said they would do in 2:18 *they set their hands to this good work* - they started building. When we come to the end of the chapter, the wall is not completed, but it is begun, and even well under way. We see all kinds of people, with all kinds of skill sets and all kinds of history, coming together here in a common cause - the rebuilding of the wall.

Now I'm certain that there are many lessons to be learned from this chapter, but I'd like for us to concentrate on one simple thought this morning - walls CAN be built.

Imagine the situation, if you would. These people had lived with the rubble of those broken down walls for many years. And now, as they begin picking up rocks, and placing them back where they are supposed to be, they begin to see that it doesn't have to remain that way. The wall was destroyed... it had been destroyed for many many years... but now they are seeing the reality that it doesn't have to remain that way. The wall COULD be rebuilt. Walls CAN be built!

Just a few thoughts along these lines, which hopefully will be helpful today:

Walls can be built, where there is leadership

Notice that the high priest was first to rise up and build. (*vs. 21*)

QUOTE (Life Application Study Bible) - "The high priest is the first person mentioned who pitched in and helped with the work. Spiritual leaders must lead not only by word but also by action. The Sheep Gate was the gate used to bring sheep into the city to the Temple for sacrifices. Nehemiah had the priests repair

this gate and section of the wall, respecting the priests' area of interest and at the same time emphasizing the priority of worship."

In few books of the Bible is there a greater demonstration of the importance of leadership in an endeavor, than here in *Nehemiah*. And we would do well to heed the teaching! No country... no business... no sports team... no church... no family, rises any higher than its leader.

QUOTE - Everything rises and falls on leadership.

Now let's consider the implications of this:

1. There are implications to our church.

We believe in team leadership here. We believe that the New Testament describes a model where a team of elders, men whom God has called and gifted for this role, work together to administer the local church, under the direction and leadership of the pastor.

We have had one round of our "Eldership Exploration" in which three men participated. Let me take a minute to clarify what that means, for I've recently been made aware of some confusion surrounding it. The three men who participated in that were exploring the Biblical teachings on eldership. They were (and are) prayerfully considering the implications to their lives, and whether or not God might be moving them toward such a role. But they are not now, and may not ever be elders. It remains to be seen whether God has called them to that, and whether the leadership team and the church approve them for that. We will, God willing, hold another round of the Eldership Exploration this fall, and I hope and pray that other men will be willing to explore God's will in this matter. Church, don't put undue pressure on these guys, as if they were elders just because they attended these sessions. Let the Lord do His work in their lives, and wait to see what happens. And men, don't fear that if you attend the sessions in the fall, that you are somehow committing to eldership. Ask the three who already attended, and they'll tell you, such is not the case. There is no pressure... no expected commitment... and no disgrace for deciding, after reviewing the Biblical facts, that it is not something God is calling you to.

These are important concepts. Walls can be built in churches where there is leadership.

That's why we've spent so much time on such issues! And why we continue to make it a matter of earnest and continuous prayer that God would raise up men to these roles!

2. There are implications to your family.

Today is father's day, and its a good reminder to the dads here - you, as God's appointed leader in your home, must take the lead.

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. 24 Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. 25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her (Ephesians 5:22–25 NKJV)

And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4 NKJV)

You are the leader, Dad. God has given you the leadership position in your home, and you need to live there. That doesn't mean you lord it over your wife and kids, but it means you lead. As Christ leads us.

Walls can be built in families where there is such God-ordained leadership from the dad.

3. There are implications to you, as an individual.

God has called and gifted spiritual leaders, and put them in your life.

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; (Ephesians 4:11–13 NKJV)

Follow the leaders God has placed in your life. *Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, (Hebrews 13:7 NKJV)*

Walls can be built in our individual Christian lives when we follow the leadership of God.

Yes, there is much that can be said about leadership. Eliashib the high priest led the way, as leaders should. Good for him. But I suggest a greater lesson than this on leadership exists here.

Walls can be built, where there is teamwork.

No pastor can easily build a church alone.

No father can easily raise a family alone.

No Christian can easily build a Christian life alone.

Oh, it can be done. By determination and hard work, it's amazing what one person can accomplish if they want to.

ILLUS - Boy who lost his eyes to cancer and learned to navigate by echo-location. "Sees" with his ears, like a bat or a dolphin. What an example of how, when an individual puts their mind to it, he / she can accomplish amazing things.

Amazing what can be accomplished by one person who is determined and willing to do what it takes.

ILLUS - Paul - reached the known world with the gospel in just a few short years.

ILLUS - Henry Varley, a very intimate friend of Dwight Moody in the earlier days of his work, loved to tell how he once said to him: "It remains to be seen what God will do with a man who gives himself up wholly unto Him." When Mr. Henry Varley said that Mr. Moody said to himself: "Well I will be that man." And look at all Moody accomplished! Millions, no doubt, are in heaven and will be in heaven forever because of the efforts of Dwight Moody.

BUT - Nehemiah was not a one man show here, was he? Eliashib, the high priest, rose up and built, but he didn't do it alone, did he? There was an amazing team of people that rose up alongside these leaders, and who pitched in. Walls can be built when such teams exist. Walls can be built where there is teamwork!

Consider, if you would, the team of people who worked together to build the walls of Jerusalem:

- It consisted of people from all vocations. There were priests (*vss. 1,22,28*) and slaves (*vs. 7*). (The story of the Gibeonites is an interesting one. Look it up on your own and you'll see that this group of people, because they had tricked Joshua into making an alliance with them, were forced to serve as slaves to the Israelites forever. Read about it in *Joshua 9*.) There were goldsmiths (*vss. 31-22*) and perfumers (*vs. 8*). There were politicians (*vss. 9,12,14,16*) and Levites (*vs. 17*) and merchants (*vss. 31-32*)

Some of these might have been really good at wall building... some might have been lousy. (Goldsmiths? Perfumers?) But all these vocations came together and formed one team.

Walls can be built when such teamwork exists.

- It consisted of people from different neighborhoods.

There were people from Jericho (vs. 2) and Gibeon (vs. 7).

There were Tekoites (vs. 5) and Zanoites (vs. 13)

- It consisted of families, working together.

Fathers and sons (good reminder for Father's Day, today!) are seen throughout the passage, and I imagine them working side by side on their sections of the walls.

Fathers and daughters even got in on the act. (vs. 12).

- It consisted of people with all levels of commitment.

Some worked hard, and did more than their share of the work. (vs. 13, and notice Meremoth, who wasn't willing to stop when his job was done! (vs. 4,21)

Some shirked, and didn't pull their weight. (vs. 5))

Some took the work very seriously (vs. 20)

Some, apparently, did not (vs. 5

Some worked close to home, concentrating on their own neighborhoods. (vs. 23,28,30)

Some had the missionary heart, and ranged farther in their efforts (vs. 13

Quite a team, huh? It is one of the greatest examples of people coming together for a common cause that you will find in the Bible. Walls can be built when such a team comes together and works together.

Are there applications for you and I? You bet!

1. There are applications for the church

- Those who have been gifted need to be using their gifts, because we need the whole team if we are going to build the wall here at FBC!

But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: (1 Corinthians 12:7 NKJV)

(Or if that's not clear enough for you, how about this translation - *A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other. (1 Corinthians 12:7 NLT)*

- Willingness to serve even when not gifted is important, too!

Perfumers? Goldsmiths? Really? (And how many of you, when you read that the high priest was leading the way laying bricks thought, "Yeah... the preacher ought to be great at that!" Be honest!)

If those particularly gifted and given to the church would exercise their gifts, the church would be one well-oiled machine, wouldn't it? But too many are content to bury their talents in the ground. And others, not-so-gifted, must step in and fill the void.

And God uses them! God uses their willingness to serve, in spite of their inadequacies. WALLS CAN BE BUILT BY SUCH!

2. There are applications for individuals, too.

Just as it is difficult for a preacher to build a church alone, so, too, it is difficult for you to build a Christian life alone.

You need brothers and sisters who are older in the faith than you, and who have already navigated the paths you face.

You need teachers whom God has gifted and placed in your life. You need fellowship and study groups. You need sermons and songs.

I've said it before and I'll say it again. There is no such thing in the Bible as a solitary Christian. Christians in the Bible were faithful to church. Christians in the Bible loved one another, helped one another, prayed for one another, spent time with one another, and held one another accountable. They lived in the "one anothers!"

You need the team. You need the church, which God has given you for just this purpose. I need the team. I could not function as a Christian without it. The walls of my Christian life are built by the team! And so, too, are yours.

3. There are applications for families... for fathers.

(You knew I would have to get this in somewhere, right? After all, it's Father's Day.)

We played a humorous video to open our service today. Some of you have probably not heard a word since, as you are sitting in your seat fuming over the fact that we played a rap video in church. Well, I'm not a fan of rap, either, and find it has little value in the church. But that video was simply meant to amuse and entertain the dads here among us. Don't take it too seriously.

HOWEVER, if we were to dissect that video for just a minute, and take it seriously (something it was not intended for), we would have to say that it was missing a key component, wouldn't we?

Where WAS God? Where was Dad's role as spiritual leader demonstrated, even for a minute? Where did we see Dad building the spiritual walls of his family? Where did we see any of that?

Let me speak for a minute to the dads. Listen to me men. God doesn't give a rip about your fifty inch Visio, or your 60 inch cut John Deere. He does not care about your 1080p or your mancave. You may think your skill as Lord of the Grill has some eternal value, but it does not. All of those things are good and fun and add to the joy of life that God wants for us. I've been thinking much of a verse lately that fits here - *He has given us all things richly to enjoy*. Praise God for the fun and enjoyable things of this life.

But that's NOT the dad life that is most important! I just mowed my lawn yesterday with my 62 inch cut ;-) John Deere. As I did I was reminded that God will someday wipe it off the face of the earth.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, (2 Peter 3:10-14 NASB)

Love your life, dads. Enjoy the blessings of God and the good things He has placed in your lives. But NEVER FORGET your most important task, and the only thing you do that has eternal consequences, is to raise your children to know and love God. THAT'S THE DAD LIFE!!!!

And you can't do that alone. You need the team. You need Sunday School teachers and camp counsellors. You need VBS workers. You need men's Bible studies and prayer breakfasts. You need golf outings with Christian men who share your responsibilities and understand the difficulty of the

task. You need the church... your brothers and sisters whom God has placed in your life to help you build the walls of your life and of your family!

Conclusion:

Well, let's bring this to a close.

The project of rebuilding the walls at Jerusalem was, indeed, underway. There's a lot yet to be done, and many lessons yet to be learned, but for now, the walls were being built.

The walls were built because of leadership.

And the walls were built because of teamwork.

Friends... Church... Dads... Let us rise up and build.

Chapter 24. Enemies All Around

READ - *Nehemiah 4:1-23*

TEXT - ... *all of them conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion. (vs. 8 NKJV)*

THEME - We can stand against enemies without and within just as Nehemiah did - pray, fight, and keep our eyes on God.

Introduction:

In *chapter 3*, we rejoiced with Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem as the wall building project got underway in earnest. We saw a fired up team get to it. We saw how important leadership is in a project, as Nehemiah motivated and led by example, and as Eliashib the High Priest led the way and was first to start building. "Everything rises and falls on leadership", it has been said, and that truth was demonstrated here.

We also learned the importance of teamwork, for in this project there was a massive team of people all working together... all following the leadership of Nehemiah, Eliashib, and ultimately God. We saw a team gathered from various vocations, various locations, various families... we saw a team showing all levels of commitment - some deeply committed... some not... some working hard and going the extra mile... some not.... But it was a team, and as a team, following right leadership, they accomplished something that had been thought impossible - the wall was being rebuilt.

Now, in *chapter 4*, we see that news of that success is getting out. People were noticing. *Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall. (Nehemiah 4:1)*

It's true, isn't it? When God does a work in a church, or in a people, or in a home, or in a life - people notice. If FBC grows, people will notice. Everytime we take a step forward as a church, people notice. When we tore down the old church sign and replaced it with a new one - people noticed. When we replaced our back yard with a parking lot, people noticed. Soon scaffolding and a lift will encircle our steeple as the restoration project begins. And people will notice.

When God does a work in a life, people notice. Most Christians in this room would testify that when they turned from their sin, and turned to the Savior... when they trusted Christ... when they were born again... when they got saved - people noticed. Family members, friends, co-workers, noticed.

Well, that is what happened here in *chapter 4* - people noticed something was happening in Jerusalem. They noticed the piles of rubble that had encircled and defined the beaten down city were not looking quite the same. Suddenly, the city was starting to look like a city again... suddenly there were walls starting to appear again... and the people seemed to be filled with a new pride and a new purpose. Jerusalem was hopping. Things were happening. And people were noticing.

Sanballat noticed. He was an enemy from Samaria, to the north of Jerusalem.

Tobiah noticed. He was an enemy from Ammon, to the east of Jerusalem.

Geshem noticed (the Arab, cf. 2:19). He was an enemy from the south of Jerusalem.

We've seen all those guys in earlier chapters. But now we see that the Ashdodites noticed. (cf. 4:7) These were the Philistines, to the west of Jerusalem.

From all sides... from every direction... from the north, the south, the east and the west, people noticed what was happening in Jerusalem.

These people were enemies of the work in Jerusalem... they were enemies of the people of God and of God Himself. They were enemies from without, and we can learn from their response.

In spite of the enemies from without, though... in spite of their opposition, the wall continued to go up. This chapter marks the half-way point. (cf. vs. 6)

And something even more insidious started to happen. In addition to the enemies from without, enemies started to appear from within. The old enemies of weariness and discouragement (cf. vs. 10) and fear (cf. vs. 12) reared their ugly heads and posed an even greater threat than the Samaritans, Ammonites, Arabs and Ashdodites combined.

Now when faced with such a withering assault, both from within and from without, some would have thrown in the towel and let the project die a quiet death. Some would have given up.

But not Nehemiah.

He prayed. (cf. vs. 4-5) This was always his first defense and his first offense. We saw him pray in 1:4 when determining what God was calling him to do. We saw him pray in 2:4 when standing before King Artaxerxes and asking for his blessing on the project. Now we see him, faced with enemies on all sides, praying.

QUOTE (Terry C. Muck, in "Liberating the Leader's Prayer Life") - "One pastor has a sign on his desk that says simply, 'Pray first.' Too often we ignore that sound advice and instead analyze first." Nehemiah prayed... it was always the first thing he did.

His prayer is interesting, isn't it? It was what we call an "imprecatory" prayer... a prayer calling down the wrath of God on the enemies of God. There are many such prayers in the Bible. The book of *Psalms* contains many examples. Some read such prayers and wonder whether Christians should pray such. After all, didn't Jesus say, *But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you (Matthew 5:44 NKJV)?* Didn't Paul say to the Romans, *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. (Romans 12:14 NKJV)?*

QUOTE - The imprecations invoked here may seem harsh, cruel, and vindictive; but it must be remembered that Nehemiah and his friends regarded those Samaritan leaders as enemies to the cause of God and His people, and therefore as deserving to be visited with heavy judgments. The prayer, therefore, is to be considered as emanating from hearts in which neither hatred, revenge, nor any inferior passion, but a pious and patriotic zeal for the glory of God and the success of His cause, held the ascendant sway. (Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D., and Brown, D. (1997). A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments (Ne 4:4-5). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.)

QUOTE - Nehemiah was praying as a servant of God concerned for the glory of God. He was not requesting personal vengeance but official vindication for God's people. (Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). Be determined (52). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.)

ILLUS - Jesus, as He angrily and violently swept the money changers out of "His Father's house" with the explanation, "My Father's house is to be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves" is an illustration.

Nehemiah not only prayed, he also fought back. This chapter is a wonderful illustration of building and battling simultaneously. And both were required here. He set a watch - lookouts to provide early warning against attack (vs. 9). He placed armed guards in the most vulnerable places - armed and ready to fight (vs. 13). He instituted a split shift system whereby half the workers laid bricks, and the other half stood guard (vs. 16). Not satisfied with that, though, he also ensured that even when working, the men were armed, able, and ready to defend themselves (vs. 17).

And he took the lead in the battling, just as he took the lead in the building. He continued to remind the people Who was in charge, and Whom they served (cf. *Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and FIGHT...* (vs. 14)). And He placed himself in the thick of the action, and put made kept his finger on the alarm button to ensure he could instantly call in reinforcements where needed. (cf. *... the one who sounded the trumpet was by me.* (vs. 18) *Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.* (vs. 20)

Are there lessons for us in this magnificent narrative?

Absolutely. Let me share two:

You MAY Have Enemies Without

1. Just as Sanballat started his attack with ridicule, you and I can expect to be ridiculed in our walk with God.

ILLUS - Goliath ridiculed David (cf. *1 Samuel 17:41-47*)

ILLUS - Jesus was mocked by the soldiers during His trial (cf. *Luke 22:63-65*) and by the crowd while on the cross (cf. *Luke 23:35-37*)

Still others had trial of mockings... (Hebrews 11:36)

Why should we expect different? You and I MAY face ridicule.

Some never meet Christ because attacks from without take away the opportunity - friends or family make fun - fear of what people will think (bigger problem for men than women? I think so... Most men are cowards about ridicule.)

Some who DO meet Christ and ARE saved, don't grow... don't progress... sit like lumps and do nothing for God, because they are paralyzed by others thinking they are "holier than thou"... they are paralyzed by the fear of ridicule.

2. Just as ridicule gave way to outright persecution, you and I may face such opposition, too.

We come to this thought often in our Bibles. Even though it is not yet the problem here in America that it is in other parts of the world, it continues to grow here, and we should be prepared to face it when it comes into our lives.

all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. (2 Timothy 3:12 NKJV)

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. (Matthew 5:10-11 NKJV)

Yes, I believe it is possible. You and I MAY experience the enemies from without of ridicule and persecution.

You WILL Have Enemies Within

I don't think I go to far when I say that you almost certainly WILL face these enemies from within. They are pretty universal, and if you avoid them, you are in the minority of Christian experience, I think.

1. If you are a servant of the Lord, you will get weary in the work.

The strength of the laborers is failing.. (vs. 10)

You will get tired in the task. You will get weary in the work.

ILLUS - Paul's list of things he had suffered - ... *in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often...* (2 Corinthians 11:27 NKJV)

QUOTE (Bill Clinton) - The world is run by tired people. (NOTE - I've mentioned this quote before, and decided to verify it. When I Googled it, I found the only references to it were in my own sermons!!! So maybe he didn't say it. I'm certain I heard it, but can't verify it. Regardless - it's a great quote, and a true thought!)

JOKE - Wally is my favorite character in Scott Adam's "Dilbert" comic strip. Wally is constantly walking around the work place with a coffee cup in hand, doing everything he can to get out of work. In one of my favorite episodes, he confronts his boss and says, "Lately, I've been feeling a lot of pressure to do work." The boss responds, "You do realize, don't you, that this is your JOB?" And Wally replies, "There! That's exactly what I mean."

There will always be Wallys in the church. They are the Tekoites, who don't *put their shoulders to the work* (vs. 5) of God. They will sip coffee while the laborers work themselves to death.

The answer if you are one of the weary ones? If you are one of the laborers who feels his / her strength decaying? Same as for Nehemiah. PRAY, FIGHT, and REMEMBER WHO YOU SERVE - THE LORD!

Nehemiah said, ... *we made our prayer to God...* (vs. 9)

SO TOO MUST WE. We must pray the Lord of the harvest that He would send forth laborers to come and assist. We must pray without ceasing. We must MAKE OUR PRAYER TO GOD.

2. If you are a servant of the Lord, you will experience discouragement.

... there is so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall. (vs. 10)

ILLUS - John the Baptist - cf. *And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to Jesus, saying, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?"* (Luke 7:18 NKJV)

ILLUS - Elijah, having won one of the greatest victories recorded in the Bible, having just called down fire from heaven, having just stood against 400 false prophets and been victorious in doing so, almost immediately thereafter fell into a funk of discouragement and fled into the wilderness where he prayed for God to take his life.

ILLUS - Charles Spurgeon, one of the 19th centuries greatest preachers and theologians, suffered from terrible bouts of depression throughout his ministry.

You and I are not immune from discouragement.

The answer? Same as for Nehemiah. PRAY, FIGHT, and REMEMBER WHO YOU SERVE - THE LORD!

ILLUS - Yesterday morning, several of our men gathered for our monthly men's prayer breakfast. We were talking about Holding the line against sin and temptation, particularly the sin of lust, which is something men deal with everyday. We were reading some thoughts from Pastor John Piper, of Bethlehem Baptist Church concerning FIGHTING and HOLDING THE LINE against lust and sins such as pornography. Let me share a quote from Piper, for it is a wonderful picture of FIGHTING, even when we get discouraged and weary:

QUOTE - HOLD the promise and the pleasure of Christ firmly in your mind until it pushes the other images out. "Fix your eyes on Jesus" (Hebrews 3:1). Here is where many fail. They give in too soon. They say, "I tried to push it out, and it didn't work." I ask, "How long did you try?" How hard did you exert your mind? The mind is a muscle. You can flex it with vehemence. Take the kingdom violently (Matthew 11:12). Be brutal. Hold the promise of Christ before your eyes. Hold it. Hold it! Don't let it go! Keep holding it! How long? As long as it takes. Fight! For Christ's sake, fight till you win! If an electric garage door were about to crush your child you would hold it up with all our might and holler for help, and hold it and hold it and hold it and hold it."

3. If you are a servant of the Lord, you may even experience fear.

... *they told us ten times, "From whatever place you turn, they will be upon us." (vs. 12)* (the phrase "ten times" was used to mean "over and over")

Does fear enter your mind when Islamic extremists behead our Christian brothers and sisters in other lands, and then you read of the rising tsunami of Islamic influence in our own land?

Does fear enter your mind, parents, when Christian parents are threatened with the loss of their children because they desire to raise them according to Christian principles?

Does fear enter your mind, when you read of men and women losing their jobs for taking a stand for Christ before their co-workers?

Does fear enter your mind, teachers, when you are constantly told that any reference to God or Christ or Jesus or prayer in your classroom will result in a law suit from the godless ACLU? (and by the way, if you want to pray an imprecatory prayer, pray it about the ACLU!!! Whenever I think of that instrument of Satan, I pray God would wipe it from the globe.)

Does fear enter your mind, patriot, when you see the Christian principles upon which this nation was founded eroded, ridiculed, attacked, vilified, and even made illegal?

The answer? Same as for Nehemiah. PRAY, FIGHT, and REMEMBER WHO YOU SERVE - THE LORD!

You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (1 John 4:4 NKJV)

ILLUS - The servant of Elisha once grew fearful because he looked out a window and saw that an enemy army surrounded them. I love Elisha's answer - *So he answered, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." And Elisha prayed, and said, "LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see." Then the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6:16-17 NKJV)*

Conclusion:

And so, they built. And as they built, they faced opposition... enemies... from without... and from within. They learned new reasons to pray. They learned how to hold a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other. They learned how to build and battle at the same time.

My friend, as we close this morning, allow me to ask one question - What wall are enemies from without and / or enemies from within rising against in your life?

There are a couple that come to my mind:

1. If you are a Christian, perhaps it is the wall of "standing firm in Christ to the end."

Do you find yourself struggling to keep on? Are the enemies from without of ridicule and persecution threatening to stop you? Are you weary, discouraged or fearful in the work?

Don't quit, my brother. Don't give up, my sister. PRAY, FIGHT, and REMEMBER THE LORD. He will fight alongside you and with you and for you. Pick up that trowel and lay one more brick. Keep that sword strapped to your side.

Some of you are sinking... slipping... not as faithful or as fired up for God as you were a year ago. If I see it, I know you do to.

DON'T QUIT!

Some of you need to pray this morning for help in this area.

2. If you are not yet a Christian, perhaps it is the wall of "coming to Christ in the first place."

Oh, how I plead with you today to not let ridicule keep you from Christ. Come to Him, regardless of what others think. They are no friends of yours who would keep you from the most important thing in life! Come to Christ, regardless of ridicule... regardless of persecution. Come to Christ before it is everlastingly too late!

ILLUS - Jesus told of those who were kept away from heaven by ridicule or persecution. He spoke of it in His parable of the soils: *But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. (Matthew 13:20-21 NKJV)*

Come to Christ and be saved, today. Let nothing stop you!

Chapter 25. How To Have Christian Joy

TEXT: *These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full. (John 15:11 KJV)*

Theme: Reminding ourselves of what we are and have in Jesus will renew our joy.

Introduction:

The Word of God is full of wonderful verses that tell us of the JOY that is ours in Christ:

(Neh 8:10 KJV) ... the joy of the LORD is your strength.

(Psa 16:11 KJV) ... in thy presence is fulness of joy...

(Psa 32:11 KJV) Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, ye righteous: and shout for joy, all ye that are upright in heart.

(Eccl 2:26 KJV) For God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy

(Isa 12:3 KJV) Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.

(Acts 13:52 KJV) And the disciples were filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost.

(Gal 5:22 KJV) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,

And yet, often we do not seem to experience joy, do we? We sometimes FEEL more like David: *(Psa 51:12 KJV) Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.*

We sometimes FEEL like:

(Isa 24:11 KJV) There is a crying for wine in the streets; all joy is darkened, the mirth of the land is gone.

(Prov 14:13 KJV) Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful; and the end of that mirth is heaviness.

(Lam 5:15 KJV) The joy of our heart is ceased; our dance is turned into mourning.

We know the Bible teaches that as believers, we have access to the joy of the Lord. We can have joyful Christian lives. Sometimes we just forget how! Let's remind ourselves, this morning, How to Have Christian Joy:

You can have the Joy of Christ by reminding yourself that:

Jesus Loves You!

(John 3:16 KJV) For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

(John 15:13 KJV) Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

(Rom 5:8 KJV) But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

SONG - I am so glad that my Father in heaven
Tells of His love in the book He has given.
Wonderful things in the Bible I see;
This is the dearest, that Jesus loves me.

1. The love of family is precious.
2. The love of God's family (church) is precious.
3. The love of Jesus surpasses all the rest.

(UNCONDITIONAL! UNENDING! UNBELIEVABLE! UNEXPLAINABLE! INEXHAUSTIBLE!

CHORUS - Think about His love! Think about His goodness! Think about His grace that brought us through!

When we think about His love, it will bring us JOY!

Jesus Is Not Angry With You!

(Rom 8:1 KJV) There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

(John 3:18 KJV) He that believeth on him is not condemned:

(John 5:24 KJV) Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

ILLUS. I had a Great Dane once, named Pharaoh, that had a besetting sin. He could not stay out of the trash! Even after wearing him out, he would turn and stick his head right back into the bin! I could always tell when he had done wrong, because he would have a hang-dog, terrified, liquid-eyed, tail-between-the-legs look which plainly said, "I know I did wrong, and I know you are very very very angry with me!"

1. When we sin, we feel sometimes that Jesus is angry with us.
2. Rejoice in the knowledge that ALL sin (past, present, and future) was forgiven and done away with on Calvary! (How then can He be angry for something that was taken care of 2000 years ago!?)

SONG - "All my iniquities on Him were laid. He nailed them all to the tree. Jesus the debt of my sin FULLY PAID! He paid the ransom for me."

Note

(Of course, this message is directed at those who have been born again... those who are saved... those who KNOW they are believers and have at some point in their lives called out and asked Jesus to save them.... To the saved, the Bible says, He is not angry with you. To the lost, the Bible says that *God is angry with the wicked every day!* (Psalm 7:11 KJV) If you are not saved, why would you want to remain in that camp, when you can have the joy that comes from knowing Christ?)

But for us who ARE in Christ, we can have joy... remind yourself that He is not angry with you... it will bring you joy!

Jesus Has Forgotten The Things You've Done Wrong!

(Heb 8:12 KJV) For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.

1. Some people never forget when we do wrong!
2. Sometimes we never forget when others do us wrong!
3. Sometimes we can't forget the wrong we have done, and do!

ILLUS - David - *My sin is ever before me... (Psalm 51)*

<listitem>

Sometimes we think Jesus is the same way, when He is just the opposite - HE NEVER REMEMBERS!

</listitem>

ILLUS. There is an old gospel song that says when we get to heaven and say to Jesus, forgive me for my sins, He will respond by saying, "What sins are you talking about, I don't remember them anymore! From the book of life they've all been torn out. I DON'T REMEMBER THEM ANYMORE!"

(1 John 1:9 KJV) If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

NOTE - He never gets tired of forgiving us for the same old sin, committed over and over and over, because He has chosen to forget it each time! EACH TIME WE CONFESS IT IS THE FIRST TIME! HALLELUJAH!

Note

(Again, we're talking about Christians here. This truth is for you. It is not for the unbeliever... for the man, woman, boy or girl who has never said, "Lord be merciful to me a sinner" and meant it. It is not for the individual who has never been born again. THAT person WILL be judged for his / her sins... because they didn't take advantage of the offer of salvation... because they didn't accept the payment for their sins Jesus made on the cross. Again I ask, why would you want to remain in that camp, when you can be saved and know the Savior Who remembers your sins NO MORE?)

Remember how we said in point # 1, that Jesus LOVES you? Well...

READ - *1 Corinthians 13:4-8 ("thinks no evil" = "keeps no accounts of evil", or in NIV - "keeps no records of wrongs")*

Nobody is a better example of this unconditional love - Jesus has forgotten all you've done wrong... all your sin...

Think about THAT... and see if it doesn't bring you joy!

Jesus Helps You Through Your Daily Life!

(1 John 5:4-5 KJV) For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?

1. He helps us overcome our weakness and sin.

(Rom 7:24-25 KJV) O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

SANCTIFICATION... becoming holy... becoming like Him... is a PROCESS that starts at salvation and won't end until we get to heaven. And HE is at the hart of that process!

2. He helps us stay saved! (i.e. He keeps us - eternal security)

(Jude 1:24 KJV) Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy,

Christian, you should underline those words in your Bible - He is ABLE TO KEEP YOU.

NOTHING you did got you saved. And NOTHING you can do can keep you saved. IT'S ALL HIM.

3. He helps us by praying for us.

(Heb 7:25 KJV) Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.

Think how He is there helping, keeping, interceding, praying... it will bring you joy.

Jesus Strengthens You When You Get To The End Of Your Rope!

(Phil 4:13 KJV) I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.

ILLUS. In my senior year at Waterloo High School, I went out for the track team. I had no previous involvement in sports, so it was a rather mediocre performance that I gave, but I wanted to have the experience of it, anyway. I remember running in a relay. The baton was handed to me and I took off running like crazy. About 2/3 of the way through my leg of the relay, though, a curious and disquieting thing happened. MY BODY QUIT WORKING! Suddenly, I felt that I had absolutely no strength left, AT ALL! It was an amazing feeling. I felt as if my body was simply flying along on sheer momentum, but that I did not have the means to lift one leg even one more time! Somehow, I managed to make it to the handoff zone, but I collapsed just as the next runner took the baton. It was sometime before I could manage to move again! Since that time I've come to understand that it was a common occurrence in out of shape, unprepared people, who try to do athletic things. In some circles, it is called "bonking." It is the phenomenon that occurs when the energy level in your muscle cells is at zero (usually because of long depletion without sufficient replenishment, such as in distance events), and the muscles simply shut down.

I had COME TO THE END OF MYSELF.

1. Sometimes we come to the end of ourselves spiritually.

ILLUS. Elijah under the Juniper tree.

(1 Ki 19:4 KJV) But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.

2. At such times, we find the strength that only comes from Christ.

(1 Ki 19:5 KJV) And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat.

QUOTE - "Courage is not having the strength to go on. Courage is going on when you have no strength."

QUOTE (John Wayne) - "Courage is being scared to death, and saddling up anyway."

In Jesus, we have just such a resource of courage and strength! *He strengthens me! (Philippians 4:13)*

Jesus Believes In You!

1. Enough to let you serve Him (and have a job all prepared for you from eternity past!)

(Eph 2:8-9 KJV) For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.

(Eph 2:10 KJV) For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

2. Enough to entrust YOU with the gospel!

(1 Cor 4:1 KJV) Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.

ILLUS. It makes a lasting impression on us when somebody believes in us. I remember when I passed my written examination for my temporary driver's license. I was just 16. Upon exiting the examination bureau, to my great delight and surprise, my mother handed me the keys to the car, and asked if I would like to drive. She believed in me... I've never forgotten that.

ILLUS - In the Count of Monte Christo, the priest lay dying, and was trying to give a charge to his friend and fellow prisoner that he go on and do something with his life... not let hate consume him... give God a chance. "I don't believe in God," replied the Count. "It doesn't matter," said the priest, with his dying breath, "He believes in you."

Jesus Is Waiting For You!

(John 14:1-3 KJV) Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

1. *Hebrews 12* pictures a "great crowd of witnesses", cheering us on in the Christian race.
2. I have loved ones in that crowd, and they are waiting for me. I look forward to seeing them.
3. All that pales in comparison, though, to my greatest fan - JESUS!

Note

(Now, AGAIN, I have to say, that this is a message for the believer... for the child of God... for the person who has placed their faith and trust in the only One Who can save them Jesus Christ. Jesus waits for such, to welcome them into His presence. The lost? Those who have refused Him, or ignored Him, or neglected the offer of salvation until it is too late to be saved? Well, He waits for them, too, but not as their greatest fan... rather as their judge. To them, the

Bible says He will say, "Get away from me... depart into everlasting judgement... I NEVER KNEW YOU." Oh friend, if you are in that camp, please turn to Christ today. He will accept you just as you are... He will save you....)

Oh, but for the Christian...!

ILLUS. The father of the prodigal watched for his return, until seeing him afar off, he ran to meet him! So Jesus waits for the believer... so He waits for me.

Conclusion:

(John 15:11 KJV) These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.

QUOTE - (John C. Wheeler) "Now that I know Christ, I'm happier when I'm sad than I was before when I was glad."

Is your life characterized by such a joy? If not, try reminding yourself of these wonderful and simple truths:

Jesus loves you!

Jesus is not angry with you!

Jesus has forgotten every sin you've ever committed! (or ever will commit!)

Jesus helps you through the trials and difficulties of your daily life!

Jesus strengthens you when you get to the end of your rope!

Jesus believes in you!

Jesus is waiting for you!

Christian, may you have the joy of Christ in your life today, and always! And if you are not yet a Christian, may you come to Christ today... may you experience for the very FIRST time the everlasting joy that is ours in Him.

Chapter 26. Stop and Restore

READ - *Nehemiah 5:1-19*

TEXT - *Please, let us stop this usury! I I Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil, that you have charged them. (Nehemiah 5:10-11 NKJV)*

THEME - We must not let the cares of life distract us from what God wants us to do.

Introduction

In *chapter 1*, Nehemiah learned of the problem at Jerusalem, and determined to do something about it.

In *chapter 2*, he journeyed to Jerusalem, and made his plans.

In *chapter 3*, he assembled his team, and got to work. The wall began to go up.

In *chapter 4*, he reached the half-way point, but not before opposition began to show itself. Opposition from without appeared in the form of Sanballat and Tobiah, who ridiculed the builders, and threatened violence against them in an attempt to stop the work (*4:1*). Opposition from within appeared, in the form of fatigue and discouragement (*4:10*), and the people feeling overwhelmed at the enormity of the task.

Well, now we come to *chapter 5*, and a form of opposition that poses a bigger threat than any Nehemiah has encountered yet. Will it stop the project? Will the wall-building cease? Will the enemy win?

Let's see.

If you're taking notes, our outline this morning will consist of three main points. (1) What was the problem. (2) hat was the solution. And (3) What was Nehemiah's example in all of this.

What was the problem?

The problem is stated in verses 1-6.

In a nutshell, economic hardship was the problem. Economic hardship was threatening the project, for people were struggling financially and as a result a great complaint and a great outcry came to Nehemiah. And as we read verses 1-6, we cannot help but notice great parallels to our society today. The same types of economic hardship that many complain about and are struggling with in our society today were causing problems in Nehemiah's day as well.

QUOTE (Teachers Bible Commentary) - "In the first five verses three classes of people are listed who were complaining of hardship. (1) There were families who had no property, and the building was working a hardship on them. (2) Some families who had property were having to mortgage it to meet expenses. (3) There were others who were having to borrow money to pay taxes. They had pledged their crops and when there were none their children were taken as slaves in payment."

QUOTE (NIV Study Bible) - ... three classes of people who are mentioned here. Number one, the landless who were short of food. Number two the land owners, who were compelled to mortgage their properties. And number three those who were forced to borrow money at exorbitant rates and sell their children into slavery because of their indebtedness.

And so, economic hardship was the specific problem.

Now, may I suggest, but there is both a very narrow explanation of this problem, as well as a broader explanation. Let's look at both.

1. First, let's consider the narrow explanation of the problem.

Noticed that verse 1 says the great outcry was against the Jewish brethren. The problem here was not just that the people were going into debt, although that is a problem... or that they couldn't feed their families... although that, too, is a problem. The SPECIFIC problem here, was that the Jews were having to borrow money and they were borrowing money from their Jewish brethren, and the Jewish brethren were charging exorbitant interest rates!

The problem therefore was lending on usury (I.e. Interest) to fellow Jews - something that was clearly forbidden under Mosaic law.

If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs. Beware lest there be a wicked thought in your heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand, and your eye be evil against your poor brother and you give him nothing, and he cry out to the Lord against you, and it become sin among you. You shall surely give to him, and your heart should not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the Lord your God will bless you in all your works and in all to which you put your hand. For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land. (Deuteronomy 15:7-11 NKJV)

If one of your brethren becomes poor, and falls into poverty among you, then you shall help him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you. Take no usury or interest from him; but fear your God, that your brother may live with you. You shall not lend him your money for usury, nor lend him your food at a profit. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God. (Leviticus 25:35-38 NKJV)

You shall not charge interest to your brother - interest on money or food or anything that is lent out at interest. To a foreigner you may charge interest, but to your brother you shall not charge interest, that the Lord your God may bless you in all to which you set your hand in the land which you are entering to possess. (Deuteronomy 23:19-20 NKJV)

ILLUS - Even Josephus in his antiquities, 4.8.25 says this, "let it not be permitted to lend upon usury to any Hebrew either meat or drink; for it is not just to draw a revenue from the misfortunes of a fellow countrymen. Rather, in consoling him in his distress, you should reckon as gain the gratitude of such persons and the recompense that God has in store for an act of generosity."

Was it wrong, according to Mosaic law, to lend money to somebody in need? No.

Was it wrong, according to Mosaic law, to lend money at a rate of interest to a fellow Jew? Yes. This was clearly a violation of the law. And this is what caused people to cry out for help in vs. 1!

2. Stated more generally, the problem was simply the cares of this life becoming a distraction.

In the rich nobles, this took the form of greed and exploitation. They were enriching themselves at the expense of their less fortunate brothers and sisters. It was simply a matter of selfishness. They were putting their selfish desires ahead of the project, ahead of their brothers' and sisters' needs, and ahead of the glory of God, which was the real issue in everything that takes place in Nehemiah.

In the poor, this because a looming problem that took their minds off the work of God.

Now, apparently, this was a pretty big deal. We might think it seems like a minor issue, but Nehemiah did not think so.

There are two clues here that Nehemiah took this very very seriously. Number one, was the fact that he got angry about it. (cf. 4:6) Number two was the fact that he called a great assembly to address this issue. (cf. 4:7)

Think about this!

Nehemiah had been unwilling to let anything stop the work for anything. The work on the wall was not stopped when enemies from without threatened to attack and caused problems. If you remember in chapter 4, he simply armed the people and put policies and procedures in place so that they could build and battle together. He encouraged them to hold the sword in one hand and a trowel in the other, but the work went on. Nor did the work stop when internal problems such as fatigue and discouragement and the enormity of the task seemed to overwhelm the workers. When they were discouraged, he encouraged them, but the work did not stop. He reminded them of all they had in God, and motivated them in every way he could to keep them going, but the workd work on.

But now, when this economic hardship comes up on people, when this matter of selfishness and greed surfaces, when the cares of this life become a dangerous distraction threatening to derail the project, Nehemiah gets angry about it, and he takes the unusual step of stopping the work, and calling the people down off the wall, and holding a great assembly deal with the problem.

This problem was big enough, to stop the building of the wall until it was dealt with.

What was the solution?

We read about Nehemiah's solution in vs. 7-13.

And, just as in point number one, I believe we can look at this from both a broad and a narrow perspective.

Narrow - stop charging interest and give back what you've already taken.

Please, let us stop this usury! Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil, that you have charged them. (vs. 10-11)

More broadly though, the solution was simply repentance. These people who were lending at exorbitant interest rates, were guilty of violating the law. Disobeying the Bible. The solution for them was the same as it is for us today, repent. They needed to turn from what they were doing and turn to what was right. They needed to repent.

And that's exactly what they did. In verse 8, *they were silenced and found nothing to say*. In verse 12 they said *we will restore it and will require nothing from them; we will do as you say*. And in verse 13 *all the assembly said, "Amen!" And praised the Lord. Then the people did according to this promise*.

When the cares of this life become a distraction, let us repent. When we are guilty of not caring enough about our brothers and sisters, as these nobles were, let us repent.

I entitled this message "Stop and Restore" from vs. 10-11 because it is the key to what happened here. They saw their sin and they repented of it.

ILLUS - John the Baptist preached repentance in *Luke 3*. If you read that (and I'll leave that for your personal study), you'll see that in every case where somebody asked him, "What do you mean, John? How do I repent?", his response was "STOP DOING WHAT YOU'RE DOING and START DOING WHAT GOD WANTS YOU TO."

The solution was repentance. They needed to STOP and they needed to RESTORE>

The example of Nehemiah

I don't want to spend a lot of time on Nehemiah's example here other than just mention it. It is noted in a couple of places.

It seems that in verse number 10, Nehemiah is saying that he had been helping people by lending to them, but the implication is that he was not doing so by charging interest.

And then in verses 14 to the end of the chapter, we see Nehemiah's specific example of how he had been living. Unselfishly.

In verse 14 Nehemiah nor his brothers ate of the governors provisions. He was entitled to this wealth and this provision, but he chose not to use it. Because to do so would have meant taxing the people, and living off of their misery and misfortune. He chose not to do that.

In verse number 16 we see that he continued to work on the wall.. He did not buy any land. He was there for the work not for personal enrichment. He believed in the task. He was not there for his own personal gain.

And in verses 17 and following we see that not only did he NOT put additional burdens on the people by taxing them, and not only did he set the example by working right alongside of them and putting the work first, but he also out of his own personal expenses provided for a vast number of people.

And the reason for Nehemiah's personal example in these matters, is seen in first number 15, where he said I did not do so, *because of the fear of God*. Nehemiah's concern about the name of God, the glory of God, the work of God, was transcendent above all else. It was not about enriching himself, it was not about his own personal power and prestige, it was all about God.

Conclusion

And so, let's sum this up, and see how it might apply to us today.

Economic hardship... the cares of this life... were threatening the work of God.

Specifically, the greed of some in the Jewish community was threatening the work of God.

And Nehemiah's solution? Number one stop the exploitation, and on a more general level lead the people to repentance and back toward a biblical view of how they ought to be living and treating one another.

And although, it is not specifically stated, the implication here is that once this problem was resolved the building project continued. I'm certain that it would not be too much of a stretch to say that the relationships between the various peoples were strengthened as well.

Let me close with 3 simple applications:

1. The cares of this life can interfere with the work of God if we let them.

It's interesting isn't it that Nehemiah did not say to the people who were complaining, you're right, your family and its needs are more important than the work? It's compelling that he did NOT say, "Go ahead and get down off the wall and attend to those issues." He did not say that.

What he DID do was everything he could to solve the problem and allow them to continue to work.

One of the implications of this passage is that the work of God IS more important than these other issues and that these other issues WERE distractions which needed to be dealt with.

And yet, I hear no excuse more commonly than "I have to work, preacher." Except maybe the excuse that "family comes first, preacher."

BOTH are lies Satan uses to distract us from the work of God.

He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. (Matthew 10:37 NKJV)

But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:62 NKJV)

If we allow it, even good things like jobs and family will displace God in our lives. And that is never His will. Jobs do NOT come first. God does. Family does NOT come first. God does. And when we get our priorities right in these areas, God will bless in every way. Our economic prosperity will be better if we put God first. (Ask those who've been attending the elective on managing our finances God's way!) And our family life will only and ever be better if we put God first.

2. We need to care about our brothers and sisters.

Let brotherly love continue. (Hebrews 13:1)

... we should remember the poor... (Galatians 2:10)

Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another. (Romans 12:10)

But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. (1 Thessalonians 4:9)

I leave it to your own personal conscience to determine whether or not in your walk with Christ, you care more about the needs of your brothers and sisters than you do about your own personal enrichment. But all of us need to take inventory in this area, don't we?

Unfortunately, many of us care way too much about our own personal lifestyles, our own personal comfort levels, and don't care nearly enough about helping those who are in need around us.

ILLUS - We have several opportunities to demonstrate, in a real and practical way, these realities. Haven of Rest - one Saturday morning per month. Men Serving - something new - opportunity to help those in our midst who need it.

ILLUS - Our church has had a benevolence fund for years. We strive to assist all those of our membership who have legitimate financial needs, and we have helped some on various occasions. Lately, I've been convicted by some comments in our Leadership Team meetings that we might not be doing enough. Pray with me about this.

We need to care about one another!

3. We need to be people of the book.

These were people who knew what the law said, but just simply chose to ignore it in this particular instance. How like us so often.

QUOTE (Boice, Nehemiah, An Expository Commentary, pp. 64-65) - "The nobles of Nehemiah's day were disobeying the teaching of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Why is it that so many within the evangelical church take the revealed law of God so casually? It is no surprise that the world does this. The world does not receive the Bible as God's book. But we do. We even maintain that it is inerrant

"in the whole and in its parts." How then can we take it so lightly? How then can we say, as I have heard many so-called evangelicals say, "But that [specific teaching] was for that day, not for today." Or, "Well, we have to be realistic. Life just doesn't fit those clear-cut categories." We play loose with the Scriptures and we need to repent of it. We need to become people of the book - in fact, and not just in our profession."

Those who were ignoring the teachings about usury were no different than we are when we ignore or neglect certain parts of the Bible just because they are inconvenient to us.

ILLUS - I spoke with a man once about baptism (which is clearly taught as a step all Christians should take), and he told me he "didn't feel compelled to do that."

But people of the book don't obey only when they feel compelled to do so. They obey because it's in the book!

But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. (James 1:22 NASB)

Well, I'm sure there are other statements we could make, or applications we could derive, from this passage. We'll stop with those three. Let's pray that God helps us not be distracted by the cares of this life... that God helps us to love one another in a real way, not just in word... and that God molds us into a people of the book, not just in word, but in profession... and not just when we "feel" it, but always and in every way.

Chapter 27. Digging Deeper Into Baptism

READ - *Acts 19:1-5*

TEXT - *When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 19:5)*

THEME - A summation of what the Bible teaches about water baptism.

Introduction

In 2011, we have desired to dig deeper... to put roots down in the belief that by doing so, we will bear fruit up.

And the remnant who have escaped of the house of Judah Shall again take root downward, And bear fruit upward. (Isaiah 37:31 NKJV)

We want to push roots down... deeper... in our relationships with one another here at FBC. We want to love one another more Biblically, because we believe the deeper the roots, the higher the fruits. That's one reason we have so many activities and opportunities in this little church. That's why we encourage you to spend time with your Christian brothers and sisters here. Softball is not about softball... it's about digging deeper into our relationships with one another. Ladies Nights Out... Men's Prayer Breakfasts... Pastor's Masters Golf Outings... Campfire Fellowships... all about putting roots DOWN into the relationships we have with one another.

And it shouldn't stop with the organized activities here. Have you invited any of your church brothers and sisters to your home? Have you accepted invitations to theirs? Have you sat down around your kitchen table with them. Have you participated... shared... served... together with them? We need to keep digging deeper in these areas.

Well, we also want to put roots down deep into our walk with and relationship with God. We want to know our God more and better. The deeper the roots, the higher the fruits!

That's why we are studying *Nehemiah* on Sunday mornings. (Next week, if God allows, we will be in *chapter 6*, so read ahead and be ready.) And that's why we are, on alternating Lord's Days, digging deeper into various topics that are central... that we need clarity on... and that we as a church need to be united in our understanding of.

In just a few minutes, we will be baptizing. Let's take the opportunity that affords and dig deeper into the topic of baptism, this morning. After all, it is a topic that many hold very shallow views on... a topic surrounding which much confusion reigns.

ILLUS - The story is told about the baptism of King Aengus by St. Patrick in the middle of the fifth century. Sometime during the rite, St. Patrick leaned on his sharp-pointed staff and inadvertently stabbed the king's foot. After the baptism was over, St. Patrick looked down at all the blood, realized what he had done, and begged the king's forgiveness. Why did you suffer this pain in silence, the Saint wanted to know. The king replied, "I thought it was part of the ritual." (Knowing the Face of God, Tim Stafford, p. 121ff)

The king was a little confused about just what baptism is supposed to be. As are many even today. So many questions and disagreements exist over this matter:

- At what age should baptism be performed?
- Does a person need to be totally immersed, or can they be sprinkled?
- If immersed, are they to be immersed one time backward or three times forward?
- Is the formula "in the name of Jesus" or "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost?"
- What about this baby thing? Are we supposed to baptize babies?
- And most importantly, does baptism save us or not? If I die having not been baptized, will I go to hell? If I am baptized, does it assure me of heaven?

One result of all the confusion is that some just set it aside. Baptism, which is clearly taught as an important thing in the Bible, becomes unimportant, ignored, or sometimes even ridiculed. Those believers with this mindset are following a similar thought process to famed atheist Robert Ingersoll, who said:

QUOTE - "With soap, baptism is a good thing" (Robert G. Ingersoll, well known defender of atheism).

But I beg to differ with the wicked Mr. Ingersoll and his atheist views. The Bible teaches that baptism is a good thing (with or without soap), and a thing that all Christians should understand and practice.

Consider our text - and take note of what a wonderful illustration it contains - an illustration of exactly what we are about to witness here today.

Here was a group of people who once they understood the truth, they wanted to be baptized, and were.

In a few minutes we will rejoice with a little sister who has trusted Christ, and who now desires to follow the Lord in believers' baptism. Glory!

Let's dig a little deeper into just what that means. And let's use 3 words to guide our thoughts - Definition, Timing, and Purpose.

Definition

There is no need to spend a lot of time on this, for there is nothing more clear in the Bible. To baptize a person is to immerse them in water.

Note

We speak today of WATER BAPTISM, not baptism in the Holy Spirit, which is another topic for another day.

DEFINITION - Greek BAPTIZO - 1) to dip repeatedly, to immerse, to submerge (of vessels sunk), 2) to cleanse by dipping or submerging, to wash, to make clean with water, to wash one's self, bathe, 3) to overwhelm

If you've taken the FBC101 class, you know we spend a bit of time on this topic because it's important.

WORDS MEAN SOMETHING. If the Holy Spirit used a word that means to IMMERSE IN WATER - to COMPLETELY SUBMERGE IN WATER, then I humbly suggest that is exactly what He meant.

READ - *Acts 8:35-39*

Aside from the clear meaning of the word BAPTIZO which requires that the eunuch was COMPLETELY SUBMERGED, notice the imagery of this text - BOTH went down INTO the water.

ILLUS - Alexander Campbell, one of the founders of the restoration movement from which this denomination sprung, - "I immerse you..." - Silly arguments and sparring broke out between Campbell and his baptist brethren because they insisted on the word "baptize" and he insisted on the word "immerse." BOTH MEAN THE SAME THING.

Timing

I saw a gospel tract once that was entitled, "What the Bible Teaches about Infant Baptism." Opening it up revealed a blank page - for the Bible teaches NOTHING about infant baptism. It is fiction.

ILLUS - Breakfast spent talking with a preacher friend who believes in infant baptism. He boldly proclaimed that the Bible teaches it, but could provide not one example from scripture of an infant baptism. BECAUSE THERE ARE NONE.

Baptism is only Biblical baptism if it takes place AS A RESULT OF saving faith. In other words, it has to happen AFTER a person places their faith in Christ.

REMEMBER - a person is not born believing in Christ. They are born LOST and become SAVED when they understand their lost condition, REPENT of their sin and BELIEVE that Jesus Christ paid the price for their sin.

as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned: (Romans 5:12) - You and I inherited a sin nature from our daddy Adam!

SONG - I once was LOST, but now am FOUND! (Amazing Grace)

ILLUS - In witnessing to others, we often ask the question, "When did you become a Christian? When were you saved?" And we sometimes hear the response, "I've always been saved." Of such, we can only conclude that they are NOT SAVED, for they don't understand the transactional aspect of it. There has to come a CHANGE, a CONVERSION, a point of going from LOST to SAVED.

And baptism, to be true Biblical baptism, cannot occur until after salvation.

ILLUS - Philip was clear in his explanation to the Ethiopian - you can ONLY be baptized if you are saved - ... *If thou believest with all thine heart... (Acts 8:35-37)*

Purpose

1. Do we baptize in order to save?

NO. Let's be absolutely clear on that point. Baptism does not save the soul. A person who has been baptized is not guaranteed of heaven. And a person who has not been baptized is not necessarily denied heaven. Baptism is not a part of the "formula" for salvation which is given so many places in our Bibles:

Believe... Acts 16:31

For whosoever shall call... Romans 10:13

If thou shalt confess with thy mouth, and believe in thine heart... (Romans 10:9-10)

For by grace are ye saved... (Ephesians 2:8-9)

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth... (John 3:16)

He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3:18)

If you don't know whether you will go to heaven when you die... if you are unsure whether you have ever been saved, the answer to your dilemma is not found in the pool of water behind me, but at the foot of the cross. Go to Jesus and tell Him you are lost. Ask Him for His gift of salvation. TAKE IT and be saved. TAKE IT and it will be yours FOREVER! Of those He saves, Jesus said, *I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. (John 10:28 NKJV)*

BELIEVING... THAT'S what saves. Trusting... accepting... receiving Christ... NOT baptism. BAPTISM DOES NOT SAVE.

There are many who have trusted Christ and never followed Him in baptism who will experience the joy of heaven. And there are many who have had been very very wet in the baptismal pool, but never trusted Christ in the first place. To die in such a state is to split hell wide open.

ILLUS - Thief on the cross - *And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise. (Luke 23:42-43)*

Why didn't Jesus say, "I'd love to help you my friend, but I'm pinned up here and can't get to the baptismal pool. If only I could dip you in water, I could help you out. Sorry."

There are churches, denominations, and pastors, who teach baptism is a requirement for salvation... that to die unbaptized is to die lost. The Bible says that such are in error.

2. We baptize to identify.

Jesus was baptized by John, whose baptism was meant to indicate repentance from sin.

Did Jesus have any sin? NO. But Jesus was identifying Himself with us sinners through baptism.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

In the same way, the Christian identifies him/herself with Christ in baptism. We speak of making a public profession of faith - baptism IS that public identification. It is saying to all - I am a Christian.

ILLUS - I wear a wedding ring, as do many of you. Wearing such does not make me married. It does, however, tell the world that I AM married.

3. We baptize to symbolize.

Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:4)

Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:12)

I love the symbolism!

Dying with Jesus by death reckoned mine.
Living with Jesus a new life divine.

4. We baptize to obey.

QUOTE - "Our justification from sins takes place at the point of saving faith, not at the point of water baptism, which usually occurs later. But if a person is already justified and has sins forgiven eternally at the point of saving faith, then baptism is not necessary for forgiveness of sins nor for the bestowal of new spiritual life. Baptism, then, is not necessary for salvation. But it is necessary if we are to be obedient to Christ, for he commanded baptism for all who believe in him. (WAYNE A. GRUDEM, Bible Doctrine)

I take a strong stand... FBC takes a strong stand, on baptism. It is a requirement for membership here, that a person be not only born again, but Biblically baptized. I've had some painful interviews with people who didn't accept or understand that their previous sprinkling was not sufficient. Some have chosen to go elsewhere as a result. Why make such an issue of it? Why not just go along with the crowd? Why consider baptism as such a big deal?

READ - *And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. (Matthew 28:18-20 NKJV)*

BAPTIZING THEM is a command! If the church is commanded to baptize new believers, what does that mean to the new believers? Are they not also commanded to BE BAPTIZED?

QUOTE - Spurgeon: "... a thing which looks to be unreasonable and seems to be unprofitable, being commanded by God, is law, is law to me. If my Master had told me to pick up six stones and lay them in a row I would do it, without demanding of him, 'What good will it do?' Cui bono? Is no fit question for soldiers of Jesus. The very simplicity and apparent uselessness of the ordinance should make the believer say, 'Therefore I do it because it becomes the better test to me of my obedience to my Master.'" When you tell your servant to do something, and he cannot comprehend it, if he turns round and says, "Please, sir, what for?" you are quite clear that he hardly understands the relation between master and servant. So when God tells me to do a thing, if I say, "What for?" I cannot have taken the place which Faith ought to occupy, which is that of simple obedience to whatever the Lord hath said. Baptism is commanded, and Faith obeys because it is commanded, and thus takes her proper place.

A verse that convicts me constantly - *And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say? (Luke 6:46)*

And how does a person justify proclaiming their allegiance to Christ, but refusing the very first command He gives?

I need no other argument.
I need no other plea.
My Lord commanded it to be,
And that's good enough for me!

Conclusion:

What does this mean to you and I? Quite simply it means that those who have trusted Jesus Christ should be baptized - by immersion, after salvation.

When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 19:5)

ILLUS - My personal experience - baptized as a baby in the Episcopal church. I was saved on May 3, 1970 in this church and learned from the good teaching of Pastor Roy Keener that that previous "baptism" (in quotes because it didn't even fit the definition of the word) didn't fit the Bible, and I needed to obey Christ. I then was baptized at the Christian Church in Ravenna, for this church did not then have a baptistry. I well remember the confusion of my episcopal relatives. "What are you doing? You were already baptized." But I had not been - not scripturally - and I wanted to obey my newfound Lord and King.

At least one today will take that same stand. Blessings upon her for her example and obedience to the Lord.

You can do the same. Are you a Christian, having no doubt that you've trusted Christ and are born again, but having never obeyed the Lord in this matter of baptism? Why not step out while we sing in just a moment. We'll ask you, just as Philip asked the Ethiopian eunuch, "Do you believe with all your heart?" And if the answer is yes, then you can be baptized today.

Chapter 28. When It Gets Personal

READ - *Nehemiah 6:1-19*

TEXT - ... *they thought to do me harm. (Nehemiah 6:2 NKJV)*

THEME - Personal attacks from the adversary will come, but we can defeat them with FOCUS, PRAYER, and KNOWING GOD'S WORD.

Introduction:

This text contains two wonderful statements that we need to need to mention right off the bat. First of all in verse 1 we see that the wall had been rebuilt, and that it was at its full height. Only one thing remains and that was the hanging of the gates on the hinges. And in verse 15, we see the wonderfully understated progress report, *So the wall was finished... in 52 days.*

Nehemiah has accomplished exactly what he originally set out to do! Great prayers have been answered that he has been voicing related to this project. The goal that he first set for himself and for his people, when he left the palace at Shushan clear back in the beginning of the story... that which he has been working toward from the beginning, is now almost almost done. At least in verse 1, it's ALMOST done... By the time we get to verse 15, it IS done.

When we started this series, we mentioned that the title we had given the series was "Building, Battling, and Becoming". All three of those themes are seen throughout the book, and we have touched a little bit on all of them. But here, as we come to the conclusion of the wall, the point could be made that we have come to the conclusion of the topic of building. And I guess we have, because as he completes the wall now in this amazing short time frame of 52 days, he has indeed BUILT that which he set out to build.

But what of the other two themes that are seen throughout this book, the themes of BATTLING and of BECOMING? Has he accomplished all that is to be accomplished in those areas? Is he done facing down the enemies who would hinder the work? Now that the wall is done, is the BATTLING over? And has he now led the people into BECOMING all that they need to be for God? Is he done?

Well, obviously he is not. After all, we are only in *chapter 6*, and there is quite a bit of book yet to come. We'll see a lot of that BECOMING in those future chapters, as Nehemiah leads his people in a different direction, not just building a wall, but becoming the people that God wants them to be.

And, although we've already seen a lot battling, he is far from laying down his sword yet. If you remember, in *chapter 4*, there was a lot of opposition . The same three enemies, that we are reminded of here in *chapter 6*, mounted an offensive against the project there. And, in addition to the attacks from these wicked outsiders, we saw that the project was also beset by certain "enemies from within." There was the enemy of weariness. There was the enemy of fear, as the people were frightened by the threats of those who were opposing to work. There was the enemy of simply being overwhelmed with the enormity of the task. *The strength of the laborers is failing, and there is so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall. (4:10 NKJV)*

Those enemies from within presented a bigger threat than the overt attacks from Sanballat and Tobiah.

In *chapter 5*, we saw them battling yet another enemy and that (also an "enemy from within") was the enemy of the cares of this life, which were threatening to distract the people from what God wanted them to do.

But now we come to *chapter 6*, and we see that all of these things, while very real battles which Nehemiah and his people had to fight, were not the end of the battling. Here, in *chapter 6*, we come to a battle that

is much more focused in its attack. The enemies, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arab have come to realize that they are out of time. And they decide to get serious.

Matthew Henry, in his commentary on these verses, makes the point that because the wall was completed with the exception of the doors being hung on the hinges, it was a now or never situation with the enemies of Nehemiah. They had to strike now, or it would be too late.

And so, in *chapter 6*, we see that they focus their attack no longer on the people on the wall, but now directly against Nehemiah the man.

In our text, we see a personal attack, actually a series of personal attacks, meant to take out the leader, himself.

QUOTE (James Montgomery Boice, pp. 68-69) "... another characteristic was that each attack was aimed at Nehemiah personally. This had not been true before. The first two hindrances were to ridicule the Jews for their weaknesses and then to threaten them with violence, trying to make them afraid. The internal problems were between the poor and the rich who were exploiting them. Not so now. In the final phase of Sanballat and Tobiah's opposition, the attacks were aimed at Nehemiah. It was an old ploy. "Sack the quarterback," a coach will tell his defensive line. "Shoot at the officers," a commander will sometimes tell his troops. At first this kind of opposition seems unwise and potentially useless, since to attack a leader is to attack the strongest rather than the weakest point of the opposing line. It is the reason opposition usually does not start at this point but rather with such easy things as ridicule and threats. Later on in the battle, it is different. Leaders get tired too, and the stress of leading a great project takes its toll. At this point, an attack on the leader is frequently effective."

QUOTE - "This time they were more subtle; their sole object of attack was Nehemiah himself. By removing him from the scene or by at least destroying his credibility with the Jews, they reasoned that they might be able to defeat the work. Each of their three attacks on him was different, but each was designed to take his life or discredit his effectiveness as a leader." (Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., and Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures (Ne 6:1-3)*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.)

This strategy is not uncommon. We have an example of it in the story of Jehoshaphat and Ahab. (READ - *2 Chronicles 18:28-34*)

And so, let's notice the three different PERSONAL ATTACKS that were mounted now against Nehemiah. And let's see if we can learn anything from them.

The Attack of Trickery

cf. *Nehemiah 6:1-4*

Now what happened in the first four verses, seems pretty innocuous, doesn't it? Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, having been openly opposed to the project from the beginning, and having tried on multiple occasions to derail it, appeared to be admitting defeat. From what happens here it appears that they are saying in effect, "Okay, Nehemiah, you've won. Obviously the wall is up, and our best efforts to hinder your project have failed. So let's let bygones be bygones, and let's just get together and talk about how we're all going to work together as governors in this area... let's call a truce, and let's meet at this neutral location, and just talk things over."

And at first glance, what could be wrong with that?

QUOTE (Boice, p. 70) "Isn't dialogue good? Isn't it always better to talk than to fight, to keep the lines of communication open? Isn't a refusal to talk to our opponents always unnecessarily and unreasonably belligerent? Isn't there a time to let bygones be bygones, to bury the hatchet? What possible reason can

there be for refusing to talk once the election is over or the job is done? That was just the problem: the job was not done. True, it was almost done, the walls were completed to their full height. Only the gates remained. But the gates remained, and until they were completed, the entire great project was in jeopardy. Nehemiah knew this, and for that reason – at least this was one reason – he declined the invitation."

Nehemiah smelled a rat. The fact was, this was not an innocuous request. And Nehemiah saw right through it. In *verse 2*, he understood perfectly well that "*they thought to do me harm.*"

Either Nehemiah knew by some secret intelligence of their plot, or he knew simply because of the type of men that they were. I tend towards the latter interpretation.

Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Then may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil. (Jeremiah 13:23 NKJV)

ILLUS - The frog and the scorpion. "I'm a scorpion... that's what we do!"

So, Nehemiah knew these men for what they were, and saw through their lies. But how did he defeat their strategy, and avoid the harm that these enemies intended?

Well, the answer is in *verse 3*. He replied that "this work is too important for me to stop, it's way too important for me to get distracted from it and come swap stories with you. Therefore, I cannot come." They repeated the same exact message four different times. And Nehemiah answered them with the same exact response, four different times.

I would suggest that the basic attack here was to get Nehemiah's attention off of the task at hand. To destroy his single-minded concentration on finishing the job. Who knows what they intended to do with him if they had gotten him outside of the city walls, and in this neutral location which actually was about 25 miles away, at least a day's journey distance from Jerusalem. Who knows what they really were going to do. But getting the leader... getting Nehemiah to lose focus on the task, would certainly have hindered the project.

How Nehemiah defeated this attack of trickery is how we can defeat similar attacks in our lives - by FOCUS on the task at hand. FOCUS FOCUS FOCUS.

I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?" (vs. 3)

QUOTE (Boice, p. 70) "What magnificent, single-minded concentration!"

I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?" (vs. 3)

By keeping his eyes focused on the job at hand, Nehemiah was able to avoid falling into the trickery of his enemies.

Oh, Christian, you and I have the same weapon at our disposal. May be ever and always keep our eyes and hearts and minds FOCUSED on the goal, and thus avoid being tricked into coming down off the wall!

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12–14 NKJV)

May we learn this as a church - never take our eyes off the goal... never be tricked in coming down from the wall. STAY FOCUSED! The wall we are building... our mission... our goal... is described clearly - WIN THEM, BAPTIZE THEM, DISCIPLE THEM, TEACH THEM. (cf. *Matthew 28:18f, Mark 16:15*) When we are tricked into looking in any other direction, we are off track and the work is in jeopardy.

May we learn this as individuals. Our enemy, the devil, so wants to divert your gaze from the Savior. And when he succeeds, your walk with Christ suffers. **KEEP YOUR FOCUS ON THE SAVIOR**, no matter what diversions come your way. Don't be tricked into looking anywhere else.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. (Hebrews 12:1–2 NIV)

The Attack of Terror

cf. *Nehemiah 6:5-9*

When they saw that no matter how many times they sent their nicely worded request to come and meet, Nehemiah was going to send the exact same rejection... when they saw that ploy was simply not going to work, they stepped up their attack. This time, the fifth time, the letter came, but this time the letter was open, and this time of the letter contained a veiled threat.

Now, a couple of thoughts about this "open" letter:

In my studies I came across one source (Jamieson, Faucett, Brown) that said that the open letter was a sign of contempt and disrespect, for a letter that had been properly sent to an official of Nehemiah's rank, would have been sealed. Interesting that this attack, if you will, included not only a threat in the letter, but contempt in the way the letter was delivered.

In other words, the gloves were off. "OK, Nehemiah... we tried being nice... we tried being civil... we invited you four times, and four times you refused our invitation... now we'll try something a little different.

Matthew Henry has a different interpretation, pointing out that the open letter was a way of saying "everybody knows about this thing, or it is common knowledge". In other words, "Nehemiah, EVERYBODY KNOWS ABOUT THIS THING, and so you'd better lay down your trowel and meet with us!"

I love how people who are trying to convince you of something will so often use this tactic. "Well, everybody knows it's true?" Kids love to use this tactic on their parents. "Mom... Dad... ALL THE OTHER KIDS ARE DOING IT!!!"

The fact that the letter was open was only part of the problem, though. It's contents were much more threatening. (cf. *vss. 6-7*)

QUOTE "This letter was insidious in several ways. First, the letter made it seem as if they had Nehemiah's welfare at heart. The letter implied that their reason for conferring with him was to protect him. Second, and more basic to their motive, they were attempting to get Nehemiah to respond out of fear. Third, the letter may have contained an element of truth. Possibly some well-meaning religious leader in Judah had interpreted Nehemiah's presence as a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies regarding the coming Messiah-King." (Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., and Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures (Ne 6:5–7)*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.)

And so, when simple distraction didn't get him off the wall, they resorted to threats. And these were not idle threats... they were real and dangerous. They were things over which Nehemiah could reasonably expect to respond with fear... even with terror.

So how did Nehemiah defeat this particular personal attack against him... this attack of terror? He fell back on his old friend... what may well have been his most tried and true technique seen throughout the book - he prayed.

Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands. (Nehemiah 6:9 NKJV)

Now, Christian, let me remind you of something. No matter how terrifying the enemies of God may appear, and no matter how they may threaten and puff themselves up... no matter how ominous world events may seem... no matter how many news articles you may read indicating that the world is winning and Christians are losing... REMEMBER THIS... WRITE IT DOWN... TAKE IT TO THE BANK... HEAR IT, MEDITATE ON IT, and BELIEVE IT Brothers and Sisters - THE BATTLE IS ALREADY WON!

These things have I spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world. (John 16:33 KJV)

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. (Romans 8:35-37 KJV)

For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. (1 John 5:4 KJV)

You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (1 John 4:4 NKJV)

But the devil doesn't want you to believe that, and will try and terrorize you from time to time. When he does, pick up Nehemiah's weapon - PRAY.

QUOTE (Matthew Henry) "When, in our Christian work and warfare, we are entering upon any particular services or conflicts, this is a good prayer for us to put up: 'I have such a duty to do, such a temptation to grapple with; now therefore, O God! strengthen my hands.'"

The Attack of Treachery

cf. *Nehemiah 6:10-14*

Listen to the following explanation of what happened here:

"Persisting in their evil planning, Nehemiah's enemies then tried to destroy his credibility by luring him into the temple. They hired Shemaiah, a man "on the inside," to propose a solution to Nehemiah. Claiming to be a prophet, he purposely locked himself in his house, supposedly from some debility or ritual defilement, and sent word for Nehemiah to visit him. Perhaps Shemaiah devised an urgent situation that would arouse Nehemiah's curiosity.

Shemaiah must have been a man Nehemiah trusted, for it would have been illogical for him to meet secretly with someone he did not trust. When Nehemiah arrived, Shemaiah suggested they meet in the temple behind closed doors. He pretended to be protecting Nehemiah from would-be nighttime assassins.

Nehemiah discerned two flaws in Shemaiah's so-called prophecy. First, God would hardly ask Nehemiah to run when the project on the walls was nearing completion. Second, no true prophet would ask someone to violate God's Law. Only priests were allowed in the sanctuary (Num. 3:10; 18:7). If Nehemiah, not being a priest, entered the temple, he would have desecrated it and brought himself under God's judgment. He would not disobey God to try to gain safety from his enemies. Nehemiah was convinced that Shemaiah was a false prophet, employed by Tobiah and Sanballat to trick him. If the governor had entered the temple and lived, his people would know he disregarded God's commands. Once again Nehemiah prayed, this time that God would remember (see comments on Neh. 5:19) his enemies and judge them for their evil scheming. In this imprecation he also included the Prophetess Noadiah, mentioned only here, who

with other false prophets was seeking to intimidate him. (Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., and Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Ne 6:10–14). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.)

Once again, Nehemiah saw through their plot.

It made no sense to him to flee (cf. vs. 11). If the leader were unwilling to stand, who would?

And he recognized the incongruities in this "prophet's" suggestion. Obviously, God had not sent him at all. (cf. vs. 12)

And he saw through their plot to their ultimate motives - instill fear in him, and lead him to sin, so as to undermine his credibility and reputation (cf. vs. 13)

His credibility as a man of God would have been damaged and his credibility as a leader would have been compromised, as people would have seen that he fled for his life and personal protection, while leaving them on the wall to fend for themselves.

Certainly one of the ways he defeated this attack was to again, pray. (cf. vs. 14) Not for the first time (cf. 4:4-5) Nehemiah prays down judgement on the heads of these enemies of God and His work.

But a more basic means of defense was utilized - knowledge... discernment - *I perceived that God had not sent him at all!* (vs. 12)

Because Nehemiah knew God, and knew God's word, and knew God's will, he was not easily taken in by somebody supposedly speaking for God!

Now there are a couple of applications I think we can make from this.

- First - no matter what comes, we must STAND.

ILLUS - The mythical 300 at Thermopylae were outnumbered by hundreds of thousands, and yet stood their ground. Such fortitude should mark the man or woman of God.

Too many Christians give up too easily. Troubles come... trials mount... sickness enters the equation, or job losses press hard upon them... or relationships sour... and they succumb to the enemies treachery and quit!

But, SHOULD SUCH A MAN OR WOMAN AS I FLEE? NO... as believers in the risen Savior... the King of king and Lord of lords, we should STAND... no matter what comes.

READ - *Ephesians 6:13-18* KEY WORD - STAND. And notice that there is no provision for retreat... no protection for the back... armor is designed for forward motion, and forward motion only.

ILLUS - Winston Churchill gave a speech at the Harrow School near the end of WWII. Here is a portion of that speech: "... surely from this period of ten months, this is the lesson: Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never--in nothing, great or small, large or petty--never give in, except to convictions of honor and good sense. Never yield to force. Never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy. We stood all alone a year ago, and to many countries it seemed that our account was closed, we were finished. All this tradition of ours, our songs, our School history, this part of the history of this country, were gone and finished and liquidated. Very different is the mood today. Britain, other nations thought, had drawn a sponge across her slate. But instead our country stood in the gap. There was no flinching and no thought of giving in; and by what seemed almost a miracle to those outside these Islands, though we ourselves never doubted it, we now find ourselves in a position where I say that we can be sure that we have only to persevere to conquer.

Stand, Christian. Having done all, STAND.

- Second, if we are to have the ability to spot the enemy as Nehemiah did, here, we must know our Bibles.

I perceived that God had not sent him at all... (vs. 12)

Nehemiah could know this because he knew his Bible... and when a word was uttered which contradicted what he knew from his Bible, he could reject it as false.

Christian, you are going to be bombarded with false teaching all your life. The TV preaches to you for hours every day, and I'm not just talking about TV preachers. Christians today are in constant danger of succumbing to the doctrine of the devil because it is preached to them through the medium of TV every day. This is one of the reasons things clearly taught as sin in the Bible are now believed to be perfectly acceptable in the church in America. God help us when we believe the doctrines of television more than the doctrines of the Word!

Nor do I mean to exclude the fact that you will hear false teaching from preachers. Many stand and proclaim "thus saith the Lord" when the Lord has not sent them. Many are the false teachers of our day who would lead you off the wall with their treachery.

But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you... (2 Peter 2:1 NKJV)

The solution is simple. Read the Bible. Let me say it again. Read your Bible. If you don't have one, I'll give you one. READ YOUR BIBLE. READ IT AND READ IT AND READ IT AND READ IT AND READ IT.

It will keep you from the treachery of the enemy. *Jesus answered and said unto them, Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures... (Matthew 22:29 KJV)*

It will give you discernment to tell when a prophet is true or not. *These were noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so. (Acts 17:11 KJV)*

How do you know I'm not a Sanballat or a Tobiah? How do you know I'm not a false prophet? How do you know I'm telling you the truth? ONLY ONE WAY - Compare what I say to what God has said in the Bible! If I'm telling you the truth, then you better listen up! If I'm not, then you better throw me out, and do it now.

Oh, Christian! READ YOUR BIBLE. READ IT AND READ IT AND READ IT AND READ IT AND READ IT.

Conclusion:

So... three personal attacks were mounted against Nehemiah. And three personal attacks were fended off by Nehemiah.

- The attack of TRICKERY was defeated by keeping FOCUSED ON THE GOAL.
- The attack of TERROR was defeated by PRAYER.
- The attack of TREACHERY was defeated by KNOWLEDGE and DISCERNMENT.

The wall was built (cf. vs. 15)

And even the enemies who had opposed it all along (and continued to oppose it even still, cf. vs. 17-19) had to admit that it was a work of God. (cf. vs. 16)

When personal attacks from the enemy come, and they will, whether against the leadership in the church (myself, elders, deacons), or against leadership in the home (husbands, fathers - that means you), or just against you as an individual follower of Christ, LEARN FROM NEHEMIAH, and stay on the wall.

Chapter 29. Digging Deeper - Bibliology

(What We Believe About the Bible)

Read - *Psalm 19*

Text - The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. (Psalm 19:7-9 NKJV)

Theme - The Bible provides all we need for our Christian life. Nothing needs added.

Introduction:

Article 2 of the FBC Constitution reads as follows:

Article II: Statement of Faith

WE BELIEVE there is one and only one living and true God, and that in the unity of the Godhead there are three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

WE BELIEVE in the inspiration, inerrancy, authority, and sufficiency of the Scriptures, consisting of the sixtysix books of the Old and New Testaments.

WE BELIEVE the Biblical account of the creation of the universe through the direct and immediate creative acts of God.

WE BELIEVE in the unique creation of man in the image and likeness of God and that physical life is His sovereign gift. The deliberate killing of the unborn, the sick, disabled or elderly is wrong and an abomination before Him.

WE BELIEVE that all men are sinners by nature and in conduct, and cannot save themselves.

WE BELIEVE in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ and that He is both fully God and fully man.

WE BELIEVE in the substitutionary death of Christ and in His literal, bodily resurrection from the dead.

WE BELIEVE in salvation by grace alone, through faith in the finished, redemptive work of Christ alone, and that no works of man, however good, need to be or can be added for salvation, evidence of salvation appears in the holy fruits of repentance, faith and newness of life.

WE BELIEVE in the eternal salvation of all who put their faith in Christ; that all who are truly born again are kept secure by God the Father.

WE BELIEVE in the primacy of the Church as an ordained institution of God with Christ as its Head. We recognize the authority of the local church and subscribe to the ordinances of baptism by immersion and the Lord's Supper for all those who profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

WE BELIEVE in the reality and personality of the Devil or Satan, the enemy of God and man, and that he is destined for eternal judgment in the Lake of Fire.

WE BELIEVE in the bodily resurrection, immortality and rapture of all believers at Christ's imminent coming and that His coming is both pretribulational and premillennial.

WE BELIEVE in the existence of a literal heaven and a literal hell and that all men spend eternity in one of the two places.

WE BELIEVE that God has commanded that no intimate sexual activity be engaged in outside of a marriage between one man and one woman. We believe that the only Scriptural marriage is the joining of one man and one woman.

WE BELIEVE that Christians are prohibited from bringing civil lawsuits against other Christians or the church to resolve personal disputes.

The Statement of Faith does not exhaust the extent of our faith. The Bible itself is the sole and final source of all that we believe. We do believe, however, that the foregoing Statement of Faith accurately represents the teaching of the Bible and, therefore, is binding upon all members. All literature used in the church shall be in complete agreement with the Statement of Faith.

Now some of the statements included therein are legal, in nature. Living in a litigious society, it is necessary to ensure our constitution protects the church as much as possible. And some of the statements included therein are needed because of the depravity of our culture. Twenty years ago there would have been no need to define marriage in a church constitution. I doubt any church statements of faith had such a clause back then. But that was then.

For the next few weeks in our "Roots Down Fruit Up" sessions, if the Lord allows, we will be digging deeper into this statement of faith... deeper into what we believe as a church. We're not going to examine each statement individually, but rather lump them together under several headings. Today, for example, I want to Dig Deeper Into Bibliology... or what we believe about the Bible.

In doing so, we should shed some light on statements 2 and 3 of our statement of faith:

WE BELIEVE in the inspiration, inerrancy, authority, and sufficiency of the Scriptures, consisting of the sixtysix books of the Old and New Testaments.

WE BELIEVE the Biblical account of the creation of the universe through the direct and immediate creative acts of God.

Now, five years ago, I preached a series entitled "What I Believe." It was the first series I preached as your pastor. These discussions will draw heavily from that series, and may seem repetitive to the handful who are still with us from those early days. But I make no apology for that, for what we believed then is what we believe now. And hopefully... prayerfully... it will be what we believe until Jesus comes again.

So today, let's dig deeper into what we believe about the Bible. For everything else about our Christian faith hinges on this key truth - The Bible is the Word of God, and is therefore all we need to order and guide our lives. It is sufficient. It is not deficient in any way. We need add nothing to it.

ILLUS - "When the preacher's car broke down on a country road, he walked to a nearby roadhouse to use the phone. After calling for a tow truck, he spotted his old friend, Frank, drunk and shabbily dressed at the bar. "What happened to you, Frank?" asked the good reverend. "You used to be rich." Frank told a sad tale of bad investments that had led to his downfall. "Go home," the preacher said. "Open your Bible at random, stick your finger on the page and there will be God's answer." Some time later, the preacher bumped into Frank, who was wearing a Gucci suit, sporting a Rolex watch and had just stepped out of a Mercedes. "Frank," said the preacher, "I am glad to see things really turned around for you." "Yes, preacher, and I owe it all to you," said Frank. "I opened my Bible, put my finger down on the page and there was the answer - -Chapter 11.""

We may laugh at that, but it is, in a way, illustrative of a truth - EVERYTHING WE NEED FOR LIFE IS IN THIS BOOK!

Notice our text - *Psalms 19*, and consider what the Psalmist says about this subject. *Psalms 19* is about God's revelation to man. It describes His "general" revelation - vss. 1-6, as well as His "special" revelation - vss. 7-14.

In the first 6 verses, which are not the subject of our lesson today, we learn that God has revealed all that is needed about Himself in creation.

Psalms 19:1 "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork."

The same truth can be found in the New Testament:

Romans 1:18-20 "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse:"

ILLUS - A while back, I was involved in a conversation at work. One of my colleagues mentioned she had read about a new planetary discovery - a new planet in a nearby solar system that scientists believe is "life capable." The question naturally arose as to whether there is life on other planets. This woman believed that it is ridiculous and arrogant to think that our planet is the only one with life, and that all that exists out there is just for us. And yet, I maintained as I always have, that the heavens DO have a purpose, but it is not to harbor other life forms as described in Star Trek. It is to DECLARE THE GLORY OF GOD. When we look at the stars, God speaks to us.

This thought is the opposite of arrogance. It is extremely humbling to look at the heavens with *Psalms 19:1* in mind.

And so, the first few verses of *Psalms 19* remind us that God declares Himself through all of His creation. Remember that the next time you look up into the millions of stars that He created to point you to Him.

Today, though, we want to concentrate on what this Psalm teaches us about God's "special" revelation, the Word of God.

Notice, especially, *The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.* (Psalm 19:7-9 NKJV)

The structure of those verses is interesting.

There are 6 descriptions of the Word of God. It is called law, testimony, statutes, commandment, fear, and judgments.

There are 6 characteristics of the Word of God. It is perfect, sure, right, pure, clean, and true.

There are 6 results of the Word of God in our lives. It converts the soul, makes wise the simple, rejoices the heart, enlightens the eyes, endures forever, and is righteous altogether.

Finally, there are 6 reminders that the Bible is OF THE LORD! It is called the law OF THE LORD, the testimony OF THE LORD, the statutes OF THE LORD, the commandment OF THE LORD, the fear OF THE LORD, and the judgments OF THE LORD.

Let's break down these 6 statements about God's Word.

"The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul."

Notice the name - "the LAW of the Lord"

This is the Hebrew word "TORAH"¹, and it means "law, direction, instruction." This word, when used to describe the Word of God, emphasizes the TEACHING or DIDACTIC nature of the Bible. It emphasizes the fact that God is teaching man through His Word.

Notice the characteristic - PERFECT

How is God's teaching? How is His instruction? How is His law? IT IS PERFECT; or to expand upon that word with its Hebrew definition: it is "complete, whole, entire, and sound."

Notice the result - it CONVERTS THE SOUL

IT IS THE WORD OF GOD THAT SAVES!

Romans 1:16 "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek."

1 Peter 1:23 "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever."

ILLUS - I read a fascinating story once about Menelik II. Have you heard of him? "He was one of the greatest rulers in African history and the creator of modern Ethiopia. Born in 1844, he was captured during

¹ Online Bible Hebrew Lexicon

an enemy raid and held prisoner for 10 years. Escaping, Menelik II declared himself head of the province of Shewa. He began conquering neighboring kingdoms and developed them into modern Ethiopia with himself as emperor. When Italy tried to take over Ethiopia Menekil's army met and crushed the Italians at the Battle of Aduwa. This victory, as well as his efforts to modernize Ethiopia (schools, telephones, railroads), make Menekil world-famous. The emperor had one little known eccentricity. Whenever he was feeling ill, he would eat a few pages of the Bible, insisting that this always restored his health. One day in December, 1913, recovering from a stroke and feeling extremely ill, he had the entire book of Kings torn from an Egyptian edition of the Bible, ate every page of it--and died." (Source Unknown)

In a warped way, he had the right idea. We cannot know salvation without the Word of God. It is the Word of God that saves, and apart from the Word of God there is no salvation. (Don't EAT it, though, READ IT!)

Matthew Henry said, "The Holy Scripture is of much greater benefit to us than day or night, than the air we breathe, or the light of the sun. To recover man out of his fallen state, there is need of the word of God."

And C. H. Spurgeon, the prince of preachers said, "It is God's Word rather than man's comment on God's Word which is made mighty with souls. Try men's depraved nature with philosophy and reasoning, and it laughs your efforts to scorn, but the Word of God soon works a transformation."

"The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple."

The name - TESTIMONY

This comes from a Hebrew word meaning "testimony, witness".

In contrast to the previous word, "law, which presented the Bible as divine instruction, this word, teaches us that the Bible is a DIVINE WITNESS. It emphasizes the fact that the Bible is God giving testimony to Who He is, and what He requires.

The characteristic - SURE

You can mark it down and take it to the bank - when God is on the witness stand, His testimony is absolutely SURE.

A few of the meanings of this Hebrew word include "believe, assurance, faithful, sure, established, trust, verified, steadfast, surely be, stand fast, trusty"

THERE IS NO Surer TESTIMONY THAN WHAT GOD HAS GIVEN US IN SCRIPTURE. Now this is a critical truth to consider in this day and age where people are constantly casting doubt on the validity of the Bible. How many have seen the plethora of TV programs and magazine articles on "other gospels" that have surfaced in recent years. Our adversary, the devil, wants us to believe the Bible is not totally trustworthy. He wants you to doubt what you read therein. This was his first tactic with Eve and he's still using it today. *"Yea, hath God said?" (Genesis 3:1)*

But regardless of those who would cast doubt, the "testimony of the Lord is sure.

Peter said it like this in *2 Peter 1:16-19* "For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount. We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto

ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts."

In other words, the testimony that we have in scripture is as trustworthy as (actually more trustworthy than) the voice of God speaking directly from heaven!

ILLUS - To get an idea of the SURENESS of Scripture, picture God as a witness in a court of law. (We've all seen enough TV to draw an adequate mental picture from.) The prosecuting attorney asks question after question, but God's testimony is SURE - He does not falter, hesitate, or stumble over His words. The prosecutor attempts to trip Him up, make Him make a mistake, reverse His testimony, but He is SURE. After an eternity of attacks and cross-examination, God's testimony will be unchanged, undaunted, unscathed. IT IS SURE.

The Bible stands like a rock undaunted
'Mid the raging storms of time;
Its pages burn with the truth eternal,
And they glow with a light sublime.

The Bible stands like a mountain towering
Far above the works of men;
Its truth by none ever was refuted,
And destroy it they never can.

The result - MAKES WISE THE SIMPLE

When we have more questions than answers...

When we don't know what to do...

When our mind is bombarded by the contradictory claims of this world...

When we are told that our views are unsophisticated and uneducated and old fashioned and foolish...

When we vacillate between belief systems...

When we, like the father in *Mark 9*, cry out in despair, "*Lord I believe, help Thou mine unbelief!*"

THEN we find God's testimony is SURE!

You may depend on it... mark it down... take it to the bank... God's testimony is SURE!

"The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart"

The name - STATUTES

If we look up the definition of this Hebrew word, we find that it means "precept, commandment, statute". We find a word that includes the meaning of the other 2 words. It has the idea of TEACHING, as in the LAW, and it also has the idea of TESTIMONY. However, the idea here is more on GUIDELINES, than on either witness or law. The Word of God contains divine guidelines to help us order our lives.

The scripture is full of guidelines for living from God. They show the path in which we should walk.

We live in the day of the "HOW TO" book. Some years ago, I performed a search for the words "HOW TO" on Amazon.com, and found that at that time there were over 32,000 books in their collection that have something to do with "HOW TO." Some examples:

How to Win Friends and Influence People, by Dale Carnegie
How to Talk so Kids Will Listen, and Listen so Kids Will Talk,
by Adele Faber
How to Be a Domestic Goddess: Baking and the Art of
Comfort Cooking, by Nigella Lawson
The Pocket Guide to Making Successful Small Talk -
How to Talk to Anyone Anytime Anywhere About Anything,
by Bernardo J. Carducci
How To Eat: The Pleasures and Principles of Good Food,
by Nigella Lawson

The point is, we live in a day when people are looking everywhere for guidelines, and here they are... "The statutes of the LORD are right!"

The characteristic - RIGHT

God's guidelines for living are ALWAYS RIGHT. His directions are ALWAYS CORRECT. His path is ALWAYS STRAIGHT.

The result - REJOICING THE HEART

God has given us guidelines for living. We may not always understand them... they certainly don't always agree with the world's way of doing things, but THEY ARE RIGHT and the ONLY SOURCE OF JOY for our lives. Why look anyplace else for help in how to live? You are never going to go wrong with the Bible. It will always lead you in right paths.

I read a quote once that said, "The man who walks with God always knows in what direction he is going."

Have you ever taken a wrong turn on a one-way street? Did it bring about joy in your life? I once was driving in Pontiac, Michigan with my wife who was great with child. As I was peacefully navigating the streets of Pontiac, my lovely wife, in a way that only wives can, reached over and touched me on the arm and said those words that strike insanity into the heart of any man who has ever heard them. She said, "Honey, I think it's time." I looked at her with complete calm, and in total control. I said, "OK, we'll go to the hospital, then," and turned onto Wide Track Drive, which is a bypass around Pontiac... about 4 lanes wide... one-way. I was going the wrong way.

There is no joy when we're going the wrong way on the wrong road. We need God's guidelines. Only in following God's guidelines is there joy.

The Bible is filled with guidelines for raising children...

... for sweetness in marriage...

... for success in business...

... for wisdom in finance...

God's guidelines give us a straight road. We need to follow them.

"The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes."

The name - COMMANDMENT

This comes from MITSVAH, a Hebrew word meaning "commandment, either of men, or of God." When used to describe the Word of God, this emphasizes the fact that God's Word contains the DECREES of God. Not suggestions, but COMMANDMENTS. It reminds us of the AUTHORITATIVE nature of scripture, its NON-OPTIONAL character.

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, saying *These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. (Matthew 15:8-9 NJKV)*

When I read that passage, I cannot help but wonder whether we have a similar attitude today, discounting the COMMANDMENTS of God, in favor of the traditions of men? And I suggest to you, brothers and sisters, that we need to get back to an understanding that the Word of God contains the unalterable, authoritative, and non-optional decrees of God!

ILLUS - In Dicken's "A Christmas Carol" there is a scene where Scrooge is with the ghost of Christmas past. The ghost shows him two small children who look emaciated and ravaged by illness, and says they are the result of Scrooge's avarice and greed. Scrooge is appalled, and looks away. "Cover them," he says. "I do not wish to see them." The ghost complies and hides them from view. "They are hidden," he says. "But they live. Oh they live."

Nobody wants to hear about the decrees of God, today. The quickest way to empty a church seems to be to remind people that they have a God Who has given them COMMANDMENTS for living. "Tell me about GRACE, preacher, but keep the COMMANDMENTS to yourself."

But they're still in there!

John MacArthur said, "The Bible is not full of a lot of suggestions. It is commandments, binding authoritative commandments. This is what God requires and for those who respond, there is blessing. For those who do not, there is judgment."

The characteristic - PURE

Several possible meanings come from the definition of this Hebrew word (BAR), including "pure, clear, sincere, clean". Most English translations have chosen "PURE" as the translation, but at least one (NRSV) has chosen "CLEAR."

I like that thought - God's commandments are CLEAR. They are not hard to understand. God has made it very plain what He expects. There is no mystery!

READ - *1 John 5:1-3*. John taught us that keeping His commandments is a sign of genuine salvation, but he also taught that God's commands are "not grievous." He has not made it hard to do what He commands.

ILLUS - In the days following September 11, the number 1 search request on internet search engines was Nostradamus. Why? Because some have said that he predicted the events of September 11. The writings of Nostradamus, however, are completely opposite of the commandments of God. Where God's commandments are CLEAR, Nostradamus' writings are ridiculously muddy and mysterious.

As an example, notice this quote from the book Nostradamus, Prophecies You Cannot Ignore, by Bernie Ward: "Nostradamus... tossed in a baffling mix of word games, puns, number codes, allusions and mysterious anagrams. Then, to muddle things even more, Nostradamus deliberately scrambled the order of the verses to further disguise the chronology." He TRIED to make it difficult to understand, and that is exactly the opposite of God, whose COMMANDMENTS ARE CLEAR - EASY TO UNDERSTAND. By the way, the comments from Nostradamus that are supposed to prophecy September 11 are, for the most part, an internet hoax... a fabrication of words that he never actually wrote, but Nostradamus scholars seem to think that the following 2 verses prophesied the events of September 11:

"The year 1999 seven months
From the sky will come the great King of Terror.
To resuscitate the great king of the Mongols.
Before and after, Mars reigns by good luck."

"At forty-five degrees the sky will burn,
Fire to approach the great new city:
In an instant a great scattered flame will leap up,
When one will want to demand proof of the Normans."

Clear, huh?

The result - ENLIGHTENING THE EYES

DEFINITION (Online Bible Hebrew Lexicon) - Hebrew word meaning - "to be or become light, shine, to become bright, to be illuminated, to light up"

We do not stumble in the dark. Our Bible, and the Commandments of the Lord it contains, LIGHTEN OUR PATH, ILLUMINATE OUR WAY, ENLIGHTEN OUR EYES!

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. (Psalm 119:105)

"The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever"

The name - FEAR

This word, when used to describe the Word of God, emphasizes the fact that the Scriptures are intended to draw us into a REVERENCE of God, or a FEAR of God.

It reminds us that God is worthy of our worship.

The characteristic - CLEAN

There is not a spec of evil or impurity in the Word of God.

The result - ENDURES FOREVER

ILLUS - This book has stood the test of time. Some portions of it are thousands of years old. (Job is believed to be the oldest book therein, and is several thousand years old). And even the newest book (Revelation,

written in the second half of the first century A.D.) is nearly a thousand years old. Yet, in spite of its antiquity, it speaks as clearly today as it did when first penned. And it still far and away outsells all other books. It is AGELESS. It is EVER RELEVANT. It is FOREVER YOUNG.

The B.I.B.L.E.
Yes that's the book for me!
I stand alone on the Word of God.
The B.I.B.L.E!

Jesus said, *Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.* (Matthew 24:35 NKJV)

"The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether."

The name - JUDGEMENTS

The Hebrew word MISHPAT is used here. It refers to judgment, justice, the act of deciding a case, a place or seat of judgment. Earlier, we learned that the Bible is God on the witness stand ("the testimony of the Lord"), and now we see Him behind the bench. The Bible is God's VERDICT. It is His already rendered JUDGEMENT.

The characteristic - TRUE

Contrast this with earthly judges, who are so often changing, corruptible, and unfaithful.

In America, we have an entire judicial system that has been designed to deal with the variability of opinion between judges and courts, and with the fallibility of earthly judges. Hence the appeals courts, and the appeal process. THERE IS NO APPEAL WITH GOD, FOR HIS JUDGEMENT IS ALREADY PASSED! READ THE WORD TO SEE WHAT THAT JUDGEMENT IS!

The result - RIGHTEOUS ALTOGETHER

I am reminded of *Romans 3:10*, "There is none righteous, no not one." None of us are righteous, and therefore none of us is really capable of righteous judgement. Edgar Howe said "The average man's judgement is so poor, he runs a risk everytime he uses it."

In contrast to the judges of this world, who can be bought and sold and make a mockery of the word JUSTICE, God's judgements are RIGHTEOUS ALTOGETHER: That means that every judgement is righteous - each individual one. And all judgements are righteous - the sum total is completely righteous.

ILLUS - Abraham asked God one time, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" And the answer that jumps from the pages of this book is, "YES, ALWAYS and FOREVER. God's judgements are righteous altogether."

Conclusion:

The psalm goes on to describe the incredible value of the Bible. It points out there is nothing of greater value than the Bible. Nothing brings greater wealth (*vs. 10a*). Nothing brings greater pleasure (*vs. 10b*).

Nothing brings greater profit to those who invest in it (*vs. 11*) - profit both in eternity, and in this life on earth.

And the psalmist also points out that the Bible changes us. It illuminates our sin and need before God (*vss. 12-13*), and concludes with a prayer that springs from just such an illumined heart (*vs. 14*).

We have spent considerable time on this subject, but I hope you agree it is important. We as believers need to get back to loving our Bibles. We need to delight in them day and night. We need to meditate in them day and night. We need to READ THEM. We need to base our lives upon them, and turn to them for the answers to all of life's questions. We need to base every single thing we do on the Bible, and on nothing else.

Legendary coach Vince Lombardi began the first practice of each season by holding up a football and saying, 'This is a football.' He would then gaze around the room while still holding the football aloft and ask, 'Have we lost anybody?'

Just as there is no game of football without the football, so there is no Christianity without the Bible. It is just as central to our faith and belief system.

Therefore, we boldly proclaim:

WE BELIEVE in the inspiration, inerrancy, authority, and sufficiency of the Scriptures, consisting of the sixtysix books of the Old and New Testaments.

Chapter 30. Three Things To Remember While I'm Gone

READ - *Nehemiah 7:1-7*

TEXT - *I gave the charge... I said to them... I found a register... (vss. 2,3,5)*

THEME - Leadership, Guardianship and Membership are all important concepts as we await the return of our departed King.

Introduction:

Nehemiah, his primary task of overseeing the reconstruction of the wall complete, prepares to return to Babylon, as he had promised king Artaxerxes (cf. *Nehemiah 2:6*). I'm not sure exactly when he left Jerusalem, but he is at least preparing for it now. He will still be in Jerusalem for a while, for the events in chapters 8-12 appear to include his presence. However, in *Nehemiah 13:6* we learn that sometime he returned to Babylon for a while, and then returned back to Jerusalem yet again. And so, I think it's fair to say that here in *chapter 7*, he is at least preparing for that departure.

And here we see three interesting things that he did prior to his departure.

- He appointed leaders to oversee things in his absence - his brother, Hanani, and Hananiah, who had been serving as the governor of the castle.
- He then gave instructions to these newly appointed leaders.
- And, he pulled together a list... a register... a genealogy, of *the nobles, the rulers, and the people* (vs. 5).

Three things he needed to take care of before departing for Babylon. Let's learn from them, this morning.

As in previous lessons, we'll use three separate words to guide our understanding - leadership, guardianship, and membership.

Leadership

READ - *vss. 1-2*

We've noticed before how many wonderful lessons on leadership may be gleaned from the pages of this book. Nehemiah was a tremendous leader, and anybody in a similar position should study his methods and mannerisms if they want to improve their leadership skills.

Here, now, we see this great leader picking other leaders to fill in for him in his absence. What criteria did Nehemiah, this great leader of men, look for in other leaders, I wonder?

Well, I see three characteristics here:

1. Concern

Hanani was his brother, or at least a kinsman.

Some suggest that Nehemiah was demonstrating nepotism in his selection by choosing his brother. I suppose it's possible, but nothing in the text suggests it, and nothing we know about the quality of Nehemiah as a leader or a man would allow it.

Three Things To Remember While I'm Gone

No, I suggest that if Nehemiah picked Hanani, it must have been because he believed him to be the right choice... even the best choice, for the role. We know very little about Hanani that would help us understand his character, or what led Nehemiah to choose him, but there are a couple things we do know, and they are helpful:

- He WAS kin, and there is therefore a reasonable expectation that that would make him loyal. Nehemiah would have sought someone who would remain loyal to him and to the direction he had established for the work in Jerusalem.

But I think there might have been a stronger reason why Nehemiah chose Hanani.

- He was the one who first shared news of Jerusalem's condition with Nehemiah. cf. (*Nehemiah 1:2*) His concern about the state of God's people and God's city and God's work was what first elicited the same concern in Nehemiah. The fact that Nehemiah cared about these things at all can be traced back to the fact that Hanani did first.

I wonder - is there any greater criteria in leaders than caring? We could apply this thought to any area of leadership - political leadership, business leadership, church leadership, leadership in our homes... in each case, how much you care is a tremendous indication of how well you will function in that role!

QUOTE - "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

2. Faithfulness

While Nehemiah's reasons for picking Hanani have to be deduced, his reasons for picking Hananiah are clearly stated. And the first reason is that *he was a faithful man.* (vs. 2)

A minute ago I asked if there is any greater criteria for leadership than caring, but now I might want to amend that question, and ask, is there any greater criteria for leadership than faithfulness?

QUOTE (Bob Jones, Sr.) - The greatest ability is dependability.

To understand just how important this quality is, consider how it hurts when it is missing! Unfaithfulness in political leaders... in pastors... in husbands and fathers... in mothers...

I looked up that phrase "faithful man" in my concordance and found it only occurs 3 times in the KJV. Once is here, of course. The others are:

- *Proverbs 28:20, "A faithful man shall abound with blessings."*
- *Proverbs 20:6, "Most men will proclaim every one his own goodness: But a faithful man who can find?"*

To be such a man is to "abound with blessings" but such men are rare, indeed.

Come and join the reapers
All the kingdom seekers
Laying down your life
To find it in the end
Come and share the harvest
Help to light the darkness
For the Lord is calling
Faithful men!
(Twila Paris)

3. Feared God more than many

What a phrase! What a description! What an epitaph that would make - "Here lies Bill Johnson. He feared God more than many."

Some other translations describe Hananiah:

... he was a more faithful and God-fearing man than many. (Nehemiah 7:2 ESV)

... he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do. (Nehemiah 7:2 NIV)

I believe this is the single greatest leadership quality anybody can ever have! Imagine if we had a president who "feared God more than most people do." We need pastors who "fear God more than most people do." Imagine, if every home was led by a husband who "feared God more than most people do" and if every child had a father who "feared God more than most people do!"

Leaders need to be at the top of the list in their walk with and devotion to God.

Guardianship

READ - vs. 3-4

I was working on this message this morning, sitting in my easy chair reviewing my notes on my laptop, when a Skype call came in from Afghanistan. Our Brother Nick Billock was calling, and so I sat and chatted with him for minute. He is counting the minutes until he can get back to American soil. He misses his family and friends here, and told me several times how much he missed the Men's Prayer Breakfasts. We need to remember Nick in prayer. Dave and Cheri, a couple of our newer friends here, also have a son serving in Afghanistan. Do you not thank God for those who stand guard on the walls and protect us here in America?

Nehemiah didn't just appoint these men and walk away. He gave them guidelines to follow in his absence... guidelines regarding GUARDIANSHIP. The walls and gates were in place, providing what security they could for the city. But somebody now needed to guard them. I like the way Wiersbe puts it in his book, "Be Determined":

"What good are strong new gates if nobody is guarding them and controlling who enters the city? What good are walls if the gates are open to every foe who wants to enter the city? I understand that the Great Wall of China was penetrated by the enemy at least four times, and each time the guards were bribed. Gates and walls are only as good as the people who guard them."

Again, let's apply this to the areas of leadership we commonly deal with today. We could apply it to the leadership of our nation, could we not? I think of the famous Ben Franklin quote:

It is reported that as Ben Franklin left Independence Hall on the final day of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, that someone asked him, "Well, Doctor, what have we got—a Republic or a Monarchy?" He replied, "A Republic, if you can keep it."

We could apply it to pastors and churches, couldn't we? So much of the New Testament instruction to pastors concerns GUARDIANSHIP. (Much of 1 Timothy concerns this - *Oh Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust... (1 Timothy 6:20)*) The NASB translates that ... *guard what has been entrusted to you.*

We could apply it to leadership in our homes, couldn't we? So much of what is wrong in American homes today is due, at least in part, to the fact that parents throw open the gates and allow every kind of enemy to waltz right in and harm their children!

ILLUS - there is a scene in the Lord of the Rings where men are holed up in a mighty fortress, and believe themselves impervious to the attacking hordes who have them besieged there. But at the base of the fortress is a little drain, which they have foolishly left unguarded, and through which the enemies gain access and pour into the city.

Again, let me quote:

All of this has a message for us today. If God's people don't protect what they have accomplished for the Lord, the enemy will come in and take it over. Paul's admonition must be heeded: 'and having done all, to stand' (Ephesians 6:13).

What a tragedy that schools that once were true to the faith are today denying the faith, and churches that once preached the gospel now have in their pulpits minister who preach another gospel. Every Christian ministry is one short generation away from destruction, and God's people must be on guard.

We need guards at the gates, faithful men and women who will not allow false Christians to get in and take over the ministry (2 Corinthians 11:13-15). We need watchers on the walls to warn us when the enemy is approaching. Christian parents need to guard their homes lest the enemy gets in and captures their children.

It is while God's servants are asleep and over confident that the enemy comes in and plants his counterfeits (Matthew 13:25), so we must be awake and alert. In this day when pluralism is interpreted by most people to mean 'agree with everybody about everything and don't make waves,' Christians need to remember that they are different and must test everything by the word of God. There are many religions, but there is still none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12). Anything that changes that message or weakens our motivation to get that message out is of the devil and must be opposed. We need guards at the gates and watchers on the wall, or the enemy will take over."

Membership

READ - *vss. 61-65*

The vast majority of *chapter 7* consists of a genealogical record, which Nehemiah did not write. He simply recorded an existing record (cf. *vs. 5*). It is the same list as is found in *Ezra 2*.

I am grateful, this morning, to our brother Jeff, for some advice he gave me recently. I was talking about the fact that Nehemiah 7 was primarily one long genealogy. I joked that it would probably be difficult to find anybody willing to stand and read the chapter before preaching it. I told Jeff I was probably going to skip the majority of the chapter, if not all of it. Jeff was saddened by that and asked me to reconsider, reminding me gently that every word... every name... every person... was and is important. Thank you, brother Jeff, for you were as "iron sharpening iron" that day.

And as I prepared for this sermon, I couldn't help but grow more and more convinced of the fact that this long list of names IS significant. This list, which includes people who came to Jerusalem in the first wave of refugees returning from Babylon... this list which includes all types of people - priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, Nethinim, and descendants of the servants of Solomon... this list is a reminder that PEOPLE ARE IMPORTANT.

I like the first 4 words of *vs. 6* - *THESE ARE THE PEOPLE* which convey this very thought.

Of course, the book of Nehemiah has historical significance, in that it chronicles the returning Jews' successful efforts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. In years yet future, Jesus and His disciples would walk the streets of that city surrounded by those very walls.

Three Things To
Remember While I'm Gone

But here, in *chapter 7*, we are particularly reminded that the story is not really about the wall... it is about the people who built the wall, and the people for whom the wall was being built. We are reminded that **PEOPLE ARE IMPORTANT**.

There are a lot of lists of names in the Bible. One is in *Hebrews 11*. We often refer to that chapter as the "roll call of the heroes of faith" for it tells of people who accomplished great things "by faith."

(READ a bit of that chapter)

In *Hebrews 11* as well as here in our text, and in every other list of names contained in our Bibles, we have a record of **PEOPLE**, "people whose faith and courage made things happen." (Wiersbe)

Why did God put it into Nehemiah's heart to list the people? (cf. *vs. 5*) Perhaps to remind Nehemiah, and Hanani and Hananiah, and you and I thousands of years later, that "The important thing is not to count the people but to realize that people count."

We are beginning construction to begin on several building projects here. We desire this building to glorify God. We believe we are stewards of this building and all things which God has placed in our trust. We want to do well with that stewardship. But the building is not the thing... it is only a means to reach and help **PEOPLE**, which **ARE** the thing! **PEOPLE** are what count.

Jesus did not commission us to go and build buildings. He did not leave us on earth while He ascended to heaven so that we might build walls. Our commission is **PEOPLE**, and everything we do needs to be about reaching them. We are not builders of **WALLS**, but rather builders of **PEOPLE**.

As Brother Jeff reminded me, *chapter 7* is a wonderful reminder that **PEOPLE COUNT... PEOPLE ARE IMPORTANT**.

But it doesn't stop there, does it? This chapter is always a wonderful reminder that God is **KEEPING ACCOUNTS**.

While this register was important, there is a register that it foreshadows and illustrates - a register that is infinitely more important - a list of names that God keeps and knows intimately.

He is keeping accounts of all who are part of the family of God.

He is keeping an account of His servants. He knows where we came from, what family we belong to, how much we gave, how much we did. And one day all His children must stand and answer for the record - for the account of how we served.

I don't want to get too far afield with these thoughts this morning, for they could easily make a separate sermon. Just accept the thought for now, would you? God is **KEEPING ACCOUNTS OF HIS SERVANTS**.

And that thought leads to the final thought that comes from this list - if you're not **ON** the list, you **DON'T COUNT**.

Perhaps you wondered why the only part of the genealogy I read for you was all the way down in *vss. 61-65*. The reason is because of this lesson. Here was a group of people whose names couldn't be found on the list. They couldn't prove their descendency from Aaron, and therefore were excluded from serving as priests.

Now let me try and make this clear. The Bible speaks of the fact that **ALL** of us must stand before God and give an account. It speaks of judgements. In one place there is a judgement called the "judgement seat of Christ."

We must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad. (2 Corinthians 5:10 KJV)

Three Things To
Remember While I'm Gone

... we shall all stand before the judgement seat of Christ. (Romans 14:10 KJV)

Now that judgement is for Christians. The important word is "WE." Paul was writing to Christians. It is a judgement for our works and our levels of service to the King. I don't understand everything about it, but I know the Bible teaches that it has nothing to do with salvation. Nobody will walk away from that judgement seat and go to hell, for only those already saved will be there. The saved are SAVED and can never be lost. There is no further judgement for sin once you are saved, as that judgement took place on the cross.

There is therefore now NO CONDEMNATION...

The judgement seat of Christ seems to be about rewards, which are an interesting concept in the Bible. I've heard some preachers say, therefore, that there is no need to fear the judgement seat of Christ, for it will only result in rewards... good things... warm and fuzzy things. I wonder about Paul's words then (*knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men (2 Corinthians 5:11)*)

I certainly don't understand all that there is to understand about the judgement seat of Christ, but I can make a few observations:

- I'm saved, so I WILL take part in it.
- There are apparently rewards to be doled out based on levels of service. Those who do much receive much. Those who do little, receive little. (I wonder what those who do nothing receive?) In any case, since I want some, I need to work hard!
- While the promise of rewards is a positive motivation, the warning of God's displeasure is just as much a negative motivation. While I don't pretend to understand it all, I'm going to listen to the warning, and work hard.

The judgement seat of Christ is not the only judgement mentioned in the Bible, though. There is another, far worse judgement - the great white throne judgement. While the judgement seat of Christ is for believers, and all who walk away from there are saved and secure in their home in heaven, the great white throne judgement is just the opposite. All who stand at that judgement are lost, and there is only one verdict and one destination - hell.

READ - *Revelation 20:11-15*

It's funny what you can glean from a list of names, isn't it? This list in *Nehemiah 7* reminds us that there is a list of the saved... the eligible... the membership... the family of God. To be on that list is to be privileged... to belong... to be secure... to have a future forever. To NOT be on that list, is to be lost... to be alone... to have no future.

Obviously, I must ask, this morning - are you on the list?

QUOTE (Wiersbe) - "We must all be sure that we know we are in the family of God. No matter how much they argued or protested, the priests without legitimate genealogies could not enter the temple and minister at the altar. God is not impressed with our first birth; what he wants is that we experience a second birth and become his children."

Lord, I care not for riches, neither silver nor gold;
I would make sure of Heaven, I would enter the fold.
In the book of Thy kingdom, with its pages so fair,
Tell me, Jesus, my Savior, is my name written there?

Is my name written there,

Three Things To
Remember While I'm Gone

On the page white and fair?
In the book of Thy kingdom,
Is my name written there?

(Mary Kidder, 1876)

Now we're not talking about the membership role of the church, although that, too, is an important thing. We're talking about God's list, the book of life, membership in the family of God, membership in the redeemed. And the only way to be on that list is to be saved... born again...

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ... (Acts 16:31)

But as many as received Him, to them gave He the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12 NKJV)

Conclusion:

Nehemiah was going away. Three words describe what was on his heart as he prepared to leave - leadership, guardianship, and membership.

May we, this morning, examine our lives in all 3 areas:

1. In our roles as leaders, whether in church, or home, or anywhere - do we CARE? are we FAITHFUL? and are we at the TOP OF THE CLASS in FEARING GOD?
2. Are we GUARDING what we have been entrusted with? Or are the gates open and the enemies of our soul streaming through?
3. Most importantly - ARE WE ON THE LIST?

Chapter 31. Digging Deeper - Christology

TEXT - *For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. (Colossians 2:9 NKJV)*

THEME - WE BELIEVE in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ and that He is both fully God and fully man.

Introduction:

Article 2 of the FBC Constitution reads as follows:

Article II: Statement of Faith

WE BELIEVE there is one and only one living and true God, and that in the unity of the Godhead there are three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

WE BELIEVE in the inspiration, inerrancy, authority, and sufficiency of the Scriptures, consisting of the sixtysix books of the Old and New Testaments.

WE BELIEVE the Biblical account of the creation of the universe through the direct and immediate creative acts of God.

WE BELIEVE in the unique creation of man in the image and likeness of God and that physical life is His sovereign gift. The deliberate killing of the unborn, the sick, disabled or elderly is wrong and an abomination before Him.

WE BELIEVE that all men are sinners by nature and in conduct, and cannot save themselves.

WE BELIEVE in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ and that He is both fully God and fully man.

WE BELIEVE in the substitutionary death of Christ and in His literal, bodily resurrection from the dead.

WE BELIEVE in salvation by grace alone, through faith in the finished, redemptive work of Christ alone, and that no works of man, however good, need to be or can be added for salvation, evidence of salvation appears in the holy fruits of repentance, faith and newness of life.

WE BELIEVE in the eternal salvation of all who put their faith in Christ; that all who are truly born again are kept secure by God the Father.

WE BELIEVE in the primacy of the Church as an ordained institution of God with Christ as its Head. We recognize the authority of the local church and subscribe to the ordinances of baptism by immersion and the

Lord's Supper for all those who profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

WE BELIEVE in the reality and personality of the Devil or Satan, the enemy of God and man, and that he is destined for eternal judgment in the Lake of Fire.

WE BELIEVE in the bodily resurrection, immortality and rapture of all believers at Christ's imminent coming and that His coming is both pretribulational and premillennial.

WE BELIEVE in the existence of a literal heaven and a literal hell and that all men spend eternity in one of the two places.

WE BELIEVE that God has commanded that no intimate sexual activity be engaged in outside of a marriage between one man and one woman. We believe that the only Scriptural marriage is the joining of one man and one woman.

WE BELIEVE that Christians are prohibited from bringing civil lawsuits against other Christians or the church to resolve personal disputes.

The Statement of Faith does not exhaust the extent of our faith. The Bible itself is the sole and final source of all that we believe. We do believe, however, that the foregoing Statement of Faith accurately represents the teaching of the Bible and, therefore, is binding upon all members. All literature used in the church shall be in complete agreement with the Statement of Faith.

As we dig deeper into this statement of faith, last time we looked at what it says about BIBLIOLOGY... what we believe about the Bible. We concentrated then on:

WE BELIEVE in the inspiration, inerrancy, authority, and sufficiency of the Scriptures, consisting of the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments.

Today, let's dig deeper into the most glorious of all topics... and persons... let's dig deeper into what we believe about Jesus. Now there are a couple of things in our statement of faith that describe our beliefs about Christology (Christology simply means the study of Christ.):

WE BELIEVE in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ and that He is both fully God and fully man.

WE BELIEVE in the substitutionary death of Christ and in His literal, bodily resurrection from the dead.

Let's concentrate our attention today on the first of those. And it will take us two weeks, for today we'll concentrate on the first half of the equation - We believe that He is fully God. Next time we'll tackle the second half - We believe that Jesus is fully man.

A good verse to use as our text is found in *Colossians 2:9* - *For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.*

Do you remember when the novel "The DaVinci" code hit the bookshelves and the movie screen? Although the book claimed to contain new and sensational evidence about Jesus, it contained nothing of the sort - just the same old recycled heresies that have circulated throughout the history of Christianity. The book's basic premise was that Jesus was never believed to be God by his followers; that was added later by the

church hierarchy. One of Brown's characters says, for example, "Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet - a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless. A mortal."

Did the followers of Jesus believe He was just a man, or did they understand Him to be the Son of God and God the Son?

Let's consider three sample scenes from our Bibles. Read along in your copy of scripture.

READ - *Matthew 27:50-54; John 20:26-28; Matthew 16:13-16*

These are only 3 examples. There are others. The Bible presents clear evidence that Jesus was and is the Son of God and God the Son. *For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. (Colossians 2:9)*

Now this is important stuff - a key doctrine of the Bible. (READ J. Oswald Sanders, "The Incomparable Christ", p. 95, para 1-3)

Let's examine some of that evidence this morning.

Evidence

He possesses the attributes of God.

As we read our Bibles, we come to see that there are certain things that are true about God... certain attributes which apply to His character. These are things that are unique to Him as God. The Bible is filled with illustrations of Jesus demonstrating those same attributes. If He has the attributes of God, He is God.

1. He is ETERNAL

- He was before John - *John bare witness of him, and cried, saying, This was he of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me. (John 1:15)*
- He was before Abraham - *Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am. (John 8:58)*
- He was before the world came into being - *And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was. (John 17:5)*
- He is the firstborn of all creation - *Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: (Colossians 1:15)*
- He was in existence "*in the beginning*" (*John 1:1*)
- He has existed "*from the days of eternity*" (*Micah 5:2*)
- He continues forever (*Isaiah 9:6f; Hebrews 1:11f; 13:8*)

2. He is OMNIPRESENT

- He was in heaven while on earth - *No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. (John 3:13 NKJV)*
- He is on earth while in heaven - *For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:20 NKJV); I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:20 NKJV)*

- He is everywhere you are at the same time He is everywhere I am, and everybody else!

ILLUS - Nathaniel - *Nathanael saith unto him, Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee. (John 1:48)*

Where Nathaniel was, Jesus was, even when He was somewhere else! And where you are, Jesus is. He is everywhere present at the same time. Only God can do that.

3. He is OMNISCIENT

He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep. (John 21:17)

In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Colossians 2:3)

He knows EVERYTHING!

ILLUS - He knew all about the woman at the well - READ *John 4:16-19*

ILLUS - He knew (knows) the thoughts of men: *But he knew their thoughts, and said to the man which had the withered hand, Rise up, and stand forth in the midst. And he arose and stood forth. (Luke 6:8) But he, knowing their thoughts, said unto them, Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and a house divided against a house falleth. (Luke 11:17)*

4. He is OMNIPOTENT

There is one word found throughout the Bible which over and over demonstrates the fact that Christ is ALL-POWERFUL. That word is MIRACLE.

- He demonstrated power over demons - *Mark 5:11-15*
- ... over disease - *Luke 4:38-41*
- ... over death - *John 11:38-44*
- ... over the elements of nature - *John 2:3-11*
- ... over ALL THINGS - *And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. (Matthew 28:18)*

5. He is IMMUTABLE.

And as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail. (Hebrews 1:12)

Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever. (Hebrews 13:8)

Eternal... everywhere present at once... all powerful... all knowing... unchangeable and unchanging - ONLY GOD is these things. Jesus is these things. JESUS IS GOD. *For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. (Colossians 2:9 NKJV)*

He holds the offices of deity.

He does the things that God does, or that God is expected to do.

1. He creates - Jesus is the creator.

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1:3)

For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: (Colossians 1:16)

And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands: (Hebrews 1:10)

2. He upholds - Jesus holds everything together.

And he is before all things, and by him all things consist (or HOLD TOGETHER, per NASB, NIV, ESV). (Colossians 1:17 NKJV)

ILLUS - I was once reading about the basic building block of all matter - the atom. The question was raised, "What holds it together?" And it's a valid question, for if you remember your physics classes, you'll remember that an atom consists of a nucleus orbited by electrons. The nucleus contains positively charged protons and uncharged neutrons. The electrons are negatively charged. A cluster of protons all positively charged should repel each other, just as magnets do when the like charges are held against each other. What holds it together? Here is a quote from someone more learned in these things than me:

You may have noticed something odd about the picture of the atom described earlier: if like charges repel each other, and opposite charges attract, what keeps the protons in the nucleus--who all have the same charge--from flying apart? This is a real difficulty, and it puzzled scientists for many years. At first, they believed that the nucleus contained a few electrons, whose negative charge helped neutralize the protons' positive charge, making a kind of "cement" that held the nucleus together. Eventually, though, further experiments showed that the nucleus contained neutrons instead; because the neutron carries no electric charge, it cannot hold the nucleus together by electrical forces.

This still leaves the possibility that some other force exists, some force which operates between protons and neutrons and makes them attract each other. Because this force must be strong enough to overcome the protons' electrical repulsion, scientists termed it the strong nuclear force. We now have a fairly good understanding of the way the strong force operates, though why such a force exists in the first place is still an unanswered question.

(Excerpted from "Supernovas: Making Astronomical History" by Blake Stacey)

I submit that Jesus is the force... the STRONG FORCE that holds EVERYTHING together.

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. (Hebrews 1:3 ESV)

He exercised the privileges of deity.

1. He claimed to be able to forgive sins.

Matthew 9:2; Luke 7:47f

2. He claimed that He will one day raise the dead in the resurrection.

John 5:25-29

3. He claimed that one day He will judge all things.

John 5:22

He is referred to by names that equate to deity.

1. Alpha and Omega - *Revelation 22:13*

2. Resurrection and the Life - *John 11:25*

3. I AM - *Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am. (John 8:58)*

4. Emmanuel - "God with us!" - *Matthew 1:22f; Isaiah 7:14*

Clearly we are justified in saying, "WE BELIEVE in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ and that He is both fully God and fully man."

Application

So why does this matter to me here in Randolph, Ohio? How does this help me with my very real problems in life?

May I suggest a few ways in which you might want to apply this to your life.

1. Since Jesus is the Son of God, we should respond to Him as such.

- If you are saved, that response is worship and service.

Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God. (Matthew 14:33)

Too many Christians are waiting for some thunderbolt to strike before they get serious about worshipping and serving God. But that thunderbolt already struck - in a manger in Bethlehem!

Believe it! And if you believe it, worship Him always! And serve Him faithfully... always!

- If you have not yet decided to trust Christ, that response must be hearing, believing and receiving.

He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3:18)

... as many as received Him... (John 1:12)

What are you waiting for? There is no further evidence that is forthcoming.

I warn you my friend, that if you do not believe on Christ in this life, you will none-the-less acknowledge Him. *For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. (Romans 14:11)*

2. Since Jesus is the Son of God, what do you have to worry about?

- He is bigger than your problems.
- He is bigger than your struggle with sin.
- He is bigger than your endless failures.

- He is bigger than everything! He is God!

... greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world. (1 John 4:4)

Ah Lord GOD! behold, thou hast made the heaven and the earth by thy great power and stretched out arm, and there is nothing too hard for thee: (Jeremiah 32:17)

Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh: is there any thing too hard for me? (Jeremiah 32:27)

SONG -

Why should I feel discouraged, why should the shadows come,
Why should my heart be lonely, and long for heaven and home,
When Jesus is my portion? My constant friend is He:
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me;

"Let not your heart be troubled," His tender word I hear,
And resting on His goodness, I lose my doubts and fears;
Though by the path He leadeth, but one step I may see;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me;

Whenever I am tempted, whenever clouds arise,
When songs give place to sighing, when hope within me dies,
I draw the closer to Him, from care He sets me free;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me;

Conclusion:

Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God. (Matthew 27:54b)

I assure you, my friend, that the centurion and those who stood gazing in amazement at the cross, had it right. Jesus is, indeed, the Son of God, and God the Son.

"WE BELIEVE in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ and that He is both fully God and fully man."

As a church, we believe that. The question for you this morning must be, do you?

Invitation

Note

With heads bowed and eyes closed, will you consider this one last question once again - What difference does it make in your life that Jesus is the Son of God?

- Will you believe in Him... believe His claims... trust Him to save your soul so that you may be with Him forever in heaven? Or will you walk out of here today still uncertain, and still in danger of dying and going to hell?

1Jo 5:12 He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life. (1 John 5:12)

This is IMPORTANT. Do not delay.

- Will you worship Him, and live for Him? Will you let Him be Lord of your life? Perhaps you have trusted Christ and are certain of heaven. But did it stop there with you? Are you living every moment for His glory... the Son of God's glory?

This is IMPORTANT. The world needs Christians who look and act and live in such a way that they see Jesus in them. Will you be one? Randolph needs such Christians. Will you be one?

- Will you rest in Him? When troubles and difficulties come your way, when struggles and trials of life overwhelm you, will you remember that He is the Son of God, and bigger than your problems? Will you give them to Him?

Chapter 32. Bring the Book

READ - *Nehemiah 8:1-12*

TEXT - *Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel. (Nehemiah 8:1 NKJV)*

THEME - Everything starts with the Book.

Introduction:

We saw a hint of it in *chapter 7* and now we see it clearly - Nehemiah's purpose in coming to Jerusalem was not just to build a wall. That was important. But he clearly had more than that in mind. In *chapter 7* we learned that people are what is important. And now, in *chapter 8* and through the end of the book, we'll see that Nehemiah will concentrate from this point forward on building a people for God.

We come, then, to the "becoming" portion of our series title - "Building, Battling, and Becoming". The building of the wall is done. Battles (although ongoing) have largely been fought and won. Now we turn our attention to what it means to become a people of and for God.

QUOTE - The walls were now finished and the gates were hung. The material needs of the city had been met; now it was time to focus on the spiritual needs of the people in the city. Chapters 8–13 of the book record that spiritual ministry: instructing the people (chap. 8), confessing sin (chap. 9), dedicating the walls (chaps 10–12), and cleansing the fellowship (chap. 13). (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Determined* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996), 95.)

Our story really begins in *Nehemiah 7:73*, the latter half of which should probably be included in *chapter 8*. It's important to remember that while we believe in the inspiration of the Bible, we know that the chapter and verse numbering, was added later by men, and is not inspired.

And so, in *vs. 73* we learn that it was the beginning of the seventh month of the Jewish calendar, and that would equate to mid-September through mid-October on our's. It was the very first day of the seventh month, the day which was to be the Feast of Trumpets ("Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a sabbath-rest, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, a holy convocation.'" (*Leviticus 23:24 NKJV*); And in the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work. For you it is a day of blowing the trumpets. (*Numbers 29:1 NKJV*).

The first day of the seventh month was the Jewish equivalent of our New Year's Day. And as such, it was the perfect time for the nation to get right with the Lord and make a fresh new beginning.

What took place on this beginning of their New Year was a huge service, where the Bible was brought out, opened, read, and translated / explained... the people were deeply and lastingly affected / changed by what they heard, and steps were taken to implement what they learned from that reading.

Several of the commentators I consulted in preparing this message agreed that this event marks the beginning of the people of Israel truly becoming a "people of the book."

I've titled today's message "Bring the Book," based on the peoples' words to Ezra in *vs. 1*. Everything about this passage circles around "The Book." And I think we can divide our study into 3 main thoughts:

1. The Primacy of the Book
2. The Proclamation of the Book

3. The Response to the Book

The Primacy of The Book

cf. vs. 1-3

Nehemiah had to start somewhere with his wall building project. You'll remember from *Nehemiah 2:11f* that he had started by slipping out at night and viewing the broken down walls, and formulating his plan for the project. He now has to start somewhere in helping this people to become the people of God they should be. Where does he start?

With the Book. The Book is always the starting place.

... they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book... (vs. 1)

Let's pause for a second and reflect on this man, Ezra.

QUOTE - He (Ezra) had come to Jerusalem twelve or thirteen years previous to Nehemiah. He either remained there or had returned to Babylon in obedience to the royal order, and for the discharge of important duties. He had returned along with Nehemiah, but in a subordinate capacity. From the time of Nehemiah's appointment to the dignity of Tirshatha, Ezra had retired into private life. (Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, A. R. Fausset et al., *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), Ne 8:1.)

But Ezra was first and foremost a man of the Book. He loved the Word of God, and made it his task in life to incorporate it into his life, and teach it to his people that they might do the same. Perhaps the best description of this godly man is found in *Ezra 7:10 - For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. (NKJV)*

So, on this first day of the Jewish New Year, Ezra the scribe and priest, a "man of the book" is called and asked to "bring the Book" (vs. 1).

QUOTE - When God's people get away from loving, reading, and obeying the Word of God, they lose the blessing of God. If we want to be like fruitful trees, we must delight in God's Word (Ps. 1:2-3). (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Determined* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996), 92-95.

Everything starts with the Book!

Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful; But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. (Psalm 1:1-2 NKJV)

1. Without the Book, nobody comes to Christ!

So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. (Romans 10:17 NKJV)

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. (Romans 1:16 NKJV)

ILLUS - I read once of two men who were riding together on a stagecoach and struck up a conversation. One man was a Christian, and the other an atheist. Upon learning this, the Christian quoted a verse of scripture to the atheist. "Do you believe you will convince me of your God by quoting from a book I don't accept?" asked the atheist. The Christian simply quoted another verse. This pattern played out throughout their journey, with the Christian taking every opportunity to quote the Word to the lost man. Their journey ended and they parted ways. Years later the Christian was walking down the street when he was approached by a man with a familiar look. It was the atheist, now saved, who had sought out

the believer to let him know the words he had quoted so incessantly had never left his mind, and he had eventually turned to Christ as a result.

2. It is the Book that brings revival!

Here is a challenge for you, church. Study the revivals that have happened throughout history. When you do, you will discover that they all coincided with a renewed emphasis on the Word of God. Great preaching of the Word brought great revival. Consider Luther, Wesley, Whitefield, Edwards, Moody! All saw multitudes won to Christ and multitudes revived in their love for Christ through an emphasis on preaching the Word.

I pray for revival often. Do you? How we long to see our church, our homes, our community, our nation and our world turn back to God. There is only one way! "Bring the Book!"

3. The state of our nation can be traced to the view our nation has of the Book!

4. The state of your home is dependent on the role of the Book therein!

Parents... moms... dads... if you allow your children to live a life that centers on the world, do not be surprised when that is the life they choose in adulthood. If the Bible is not a central figure in your home (more so than the television and Facebook and any other worldly influence), then don't be surprised when your children show no interest.

It is so common to hear parents of adult children regretting the fact their children moved away from home and now they show no interest in church or the things of God. Small wonder, Dad, since every Sunday you taught them by your actions that church was ok, as long as nothing more interesting happened to be going on! Small wonder, mom, since every evening they saw you watching "Desperate Housewives" and can't remember a time they ever saw you pick up your Bible except to carry it like a decoration to church.

Godly homes start when we "BRING THE BOOK!"

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! 5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. 6 "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9 NKJV)

5. Your personal walk with God depends on your personal dependence on the Book

True success does not come from education... or upbringing... or even from hard work. All of those are valuable and encouraged. But ultimately, true success comes when we "bring the Book" into our daily lives.

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. (Joshua 1:8 NKJV)

If these people were to become what they could be for God, they needed to be a people of the Book. And so, they said to Ezra, "BRING THE BOOK".

A couple of other interesting points that I'll mention and just allow you to chew on on your own:

- In *vs. 1*, it's interesting that the people were the ones to ask Ezra to bring the book. These people WANTED to know the Bible. It was not something that had to be thrust upon them. They WANTED

it, and SOUGHT it. Do we as a people? Do we really want to order our lives around the Book? Or do we just want to hear the easy parts and prefer the others be shoved to the side?

- *Verse 1* also gives us some idea of the scope of this event when it mentions *all the people*. Taken together with what we learned from *chapter 7, esp. vss. 66-67*, we can conclude that there was somewhere in the neighborhood of 30,000-50,000 people in attendance.
- The Book was for everybody - cf. *vss. 2-3* - men, women, and children who could understand - IOW, anybody who could hear and understand was included.

And so we learn about "The Primacy of the Book." It is where everything starts. Let us, like these people, never stop saying "Bring the Book!"

The Proclamation of the Book

cf. *vss. 4-8*

There is wonderful detail here about HOW the Book was proclaimed on this day.

1. It was read from a raised platform (*vs. 4*)

Some translations have "pulpit" which makes us think of our modern designs, but it was probably a simple platform, constructed just for this day, and designed to elevate Ezra so he could be seen and heard. It would have been large enough to accommodate the other men who were standing with Ezra.

ILLUS - We are in the midst of a somewhat costly set of renovations and upgrades to our building here. This building, like the platform used here, was constructed long ago for the express purpose of proclaiming the Word of God. Hence we maintain it, and hence we improve it, that the Word of God might continue to be proclaimed, with increasing frequency and efficiency. I'm guessing that once the proclamation of the Word was over here, the platform was dismantled. And in like manner, when the Word of God ceases to go forth from this place, this building will no longer have a purpose.

2. It was opened, and all the people stood. (*vs. 5*)

This is the custom in many churches today, as a direct result, I suspect, of this passage. They stood out of reverence and respect, not for Ezra or anybody else on the platform, but for the book, itself. This was a recognition that it was not the word of Ezra, but the word of God.

They were not worshipping the Book... but they WERE showing respect and reverence for it.

ILLUS - I attended a Jewish bat mitzvah once for a relative whose daughter had reached that milestone. I found several things fascinating in the event, but the one that sticks most in my mind was the reaction of this group of Jewish people when the Torah was removed from the ark. It was carried from the ark and down one aisle and up another, until it had passed through the entire congregation. The people pressed toward it, reaching out to touch it, and kissing toward it as it passed. It was a reverence for the Word of God that impressed me.

ILLUS - My pastor in New Jersey walked into my office once and was critical of a stack of books on my desk. He didn't like the fact that I had other books lying atop my Bible, which was in the middle of the stack. Nothing should be on top of the Bible, he said.

This is not just a book, church. When we "bring the Book" we need to give it proper reverence. It is the Word of God. Do we treat it as such?

3. It was read distinctly. (*vs. 8*)

Where the NKJV has "distinctly", other translations have "clearly". The NIV says they read "making it clear."

Oh how we need CLEAR teaching of the Bible.

A great fear of any pastor / teacher must be lack of clarity. Nothing should be feared more than hearing people say, "What in the world was he talking about?" or "Did you get any of that? I didn't understand a word of it."

QUOTE - "If you are out to describe the truth, leave elegance to the tailor." - Albert Einstein

God help us to read... and teach... DISTINCTLY... CLEARLY.

4. It was translated or explained (vs. 8)

There is discussion amongst Bible scholars about what the phrase which is rendered in the KJV/NKJV "gave the sense" means. Several schools of thought:

- a. They EXPLAINED it. One commentator suggested that this was the equivalent of "expository preaching" where the text is read and then explained.
- b. They TRANSLATED it. The NASB even renders it that way (*translating to give the sense*).

Moses had lived 1000+ years earlier, and there was no doubt a language difference now. These people may not have even spoken / understood Hebrew, as they were raised under Babylon's influence and probably spoke Chaldee, or maybe Aramaic. It is possible that translation was needed for them to understand.

ILLUS - There are those who believe the King James Bible is the only translation that is truly the Word of God. I heard a preacher friend proclaim from the pulpit once that he had no problem with your reading other translations, as long as you recognized they are merely commentaries... only the King James is the Bible. But that is not scriptural, nor is it practical. People today do not speak in Elizabethan English. The language has changed. And it is vital that we make it clear and give the sense when we proclaim it!

in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue. (1 Corinthians 14:19 NIV) (NOTE - Paul was speaking specifically about the gift of "speaking in tongues" in that passage, but the thought applies - it is vital that we make it clear... that we translate the word so that it can be understood.)

ILLUS - Next Lord's Day, missionary Ken Boothe will be sharing his ministry of Bible translation under Wycliffe Bible Translators. He will have much to say about this topic, I'm sure. You'll want to hear him.

5. It was made understandable. (vs. 8)

... helped them to understand...

Pretty much summarizes the other points in that verse. And it emphasizes what seems to be a key thought in the chapter.

QUOTE - Note that six times in this chapter you can find "understanding" mentioned (vv. 2-3, 7-8, 12-13). (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Determined* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996), 95.)

What implications this has for every ministry in this church! Men's ministries, Women's ministries, Teen ministries, Childrens' ministries - in every case, reading the Book is important... teaching the

book is vital... but more than anything let us ensure that when we "BRING THE BOOK" we make it UNDERSTANDABLE.

The Response to The Book

cf. vss. 9f

We'll learn more about the response in future studies, but let me just make note quickly of two main responses that occurred.

1. Sorrow. *All the people wept, when they heard the words... (vs. 9)*

The Bible does not save us, but it DOES show us our need for a Savior. It points an undeniable finger at our sin... at our lost condition...

The Bible tells us that *all have sinned, and the wages of that sin is death (Romans 3:23, 6:23)*. The Bible warns that *the soul that sinneth, it shall die (Ezekiel 18:4)*. It tells us that *He that hath not the Son hath not life, but the wrath of God abides on him. (1 John 5:12; John 3:36)*

How do we hear such things and not feel sorrow? How do we not despair at our state? These Jews heard of their sins, so plainly spoken of in the Book, and they mourned.

Such mourning leads to confession, which we'll see more of in *chapter 9*, and confession is a step toward salvation.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive... (1 John 1:9)

Jesus said, *Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. (Matthew 5:4)*

Being saved cannot happen without being lost! We have to see our need! Mourning and sorrow come first, as we learn how far away we are from God. Only then can we be saved.

2. Joy. *Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. (vs. 10)*

The same word that wounds, also heals! The same book that brings sorrow to our hearts over our sin, can bring the joy of the Lord over His salvation!

Paul said, *Rejoice in the Lord, always, and again I say, REJOICE! (Philippians 4:4 KJV)*

The ultimate goal of "bringing the Book" is not sorrow but joy! And you and I can have that joy if we'll just turn to the Savior Who is the subject of the Book and believe in Him.

Conclusion:

QUOTE (A.W. Tozer) - The Word of God well understood and religiously obeyed is the shortest route to spiritual perfection. And we must not select a few favorite passages to the exclusion of others. Nothing less than a whole Bible can make a whole Christian.

What was the first step for these people as they set out to become a people of God... as they began the process of BECOMING what God would have them to be?

The first step was to BRING THE BOOK.

It is a step we all need to take - in our nation, our church, our communities, our homes, and our hearts.

QUOTE (John Wesley) - I am a creature of a day. I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God. I want to know one thing: the way to heaven. God himself has condescended to teach me the way. He has written it down in a book. Oh, give me that book! At any price give me the book of God. Let me be a man of one book.

Oh Friendship Bible Church, let us be men and women of one book! **BRING THE BOOK!**

Chapter 33. Digging Deeper - Christology (Part 2)

READ - *1 John 1:1-4*

TEXT - *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (1 John 1:1)*

THEME - Jesus is the Son of God, and He is also the Son of man. His humanity is as important as His deity.

Introduction:

Today, Friendship Bible Church observes it's third annual Old Fashioned Sunday.

It is meant to be a fun day... a day of celebration and fellowship and fun. It is also meant to be a day of reflection.

1. It is a day in which we LOOK BACK.
2. It is a day in which we LOOK AROUND.
3. It is a day in which we LOOK AHEAD.

Now here at FBC, we believe in some things. We believe, for example, in the Bible. We believe it is more than a mere book penned by men, but is actually the very inspired Word of God. And from it's pages we learn of a man who lived and died a couple thousand years ago... a man who so changed history that time itself is measured around his life... a man... actually more than a man... named Jesus Christ.

Here at FBC we have what's called a "Statement of Faith." It is simply a document describing our core beliefs, and it is available for all to see and read on our web site. In that statement of faith we read:

WE BELIEVE in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ and that He is both fully God and fully man.

It's important, to think about Jesus on Old Fashioned Sunday. You see, we can talk about the history of our church all day long, but the fact is without Jesus Christ, there is no real history to this church. Jesus is, you might say, in our very DNA here.

1. We LOOK BACK, and we see Jesus.

With the bulletin, this morning, you should find a little memento of this day... a bookmark to commemorate Old Fashioned Sunday, 2011. That bookmark contains a quotation from the history of this church, a quotation dated July 20, 1828, which reads "On this day came forward the baptized disciples of Jesus Christ our Lord, and acknowledged Him to be their only teacher and lawgiver, and the Holy Scriptures to be their only guide, and agreed to maintain Christian worship according to the aforesaid declaration." From the very earliest days of this church, whether it was called Disciples Church, or Randolph Christian Church, or Friendship Bible Church, JESUS CHRIST has been at it's very center.

2. We LOOK AROUND, and see Jesus working in our midst even now.

3. We LOOK FORWARD to the culmination of all this church stands for when Jesus returns to call us home.

A couple weeks ago we delved a little deeper into that statement of faith, that "WE BELIEVE in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ and that He is both fully God and fully man." We dug deeper into the fact that this man, Jesus, is the son of God... that he is "fully God"... that He is "just as much God as if He had never been man". As we considered that truth we learned that:

1. Jesus is everything God is.

Everything that is true of God is true of Jesus. All God's attributes are seen and demonstrated in Jesus Christ.

2. Jesus did everything God does.

The Bible says Jesus is the One Who created all, and Jesus is the One Who sustains all.

3. Jesus exercised all the privileges of deity.

He forgave (and forgives) sin... He claimed that He will one day raise the dead in the resurrection, and that He and He alone will judge all things.

4. Jesus is called by names that can only refer to God... to deity.

He is the Alpha and the Omega... the beginning and the end... the resurrection and the life... the I AM... and Emmanuel, which means, "God with us."

It is because the Bible says these things that we proclaim without apology - "WE BELIEVE... Jesus Christ... is fully God."

But wait a minute... our statement of faith said more than that, didn't it? Our statement of faith said that we believe He is fully God, and FULLY MAN... not only is He "just as much God as if He had never been man" but He is "just as much man as if He had never been God."

Let's spend a few minutes thinking about that.

The Bible does present compelling evidence that Jesus was a human being... a man.

He was born, just like any other man.

But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, (Galatians 4:4)

He LOOKED LIKE any other man.

And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. (Philippians 2:8)

He had all the outward indications He was a man - "fashion" = "appearance".

BTW - This verse also points out that He demonstrated His humanity with that which is most human about us - He died!

He was made of flesh!

He had a BODY - *Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have. (Luke 24:39)*

He was made of FLESH - *And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)*

He could be HANDLED - cf. our text - *1 John 1:1*

He grew up, just like any other, from childhood to manhood - *And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man. (Luke 2:52)*

OK... so the Bible teaches He was human... SO WHAT?

We may not understand this all until we get to heaven, but we believe and accept it because it's what the Bible teaches. We believe that Jesus is fully God and fully man. We believe that Jesus is just as much God as if He had never been man, and that He is just as much man as if He had never been God. We believe that Jesus is 100% God and 100% man!

If you're like most people, you're probably confused, trying to sort this out. How could Jesus be both God and man?

Don't feel bad if it confuses you. Paul, the greatest theologian who ever lived, was confused by it, too, calling it a "great mystery."

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory. (1 Timothy 3:16)

And an even more important question than "Does this confuse you" is "Does this MATTER to you?" What does this have to do with Old Fashioned Sunday at FBC? And how does it help me with my very real problems in 2011?

Well, to be honest, I can't think of any other truth of scripture that applies MORE to you and I than this one. For this is what makes Christ truly precious to us. He was and is, as His name Emmanuel reminds us, "God with us." He is God, but He is also one of us. Think about what that means:

It means we can know what God is like.

No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him. (John 1:18)

It means we have an example of how to live.

For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: (1 Peter 2:21)

In a world filled and overflowing with information, how do we know what to do? Conflicting voices shout from all sides about how we should live, and these often conflict with what we read in our Bibles. Is there an example we can follow? YES - Christ is our example.

There are very few issues in life that you cannot ask "What would Christ do in this instance?" and find an example from His life. Live like He did, do what He would do, and you will never go wrong!

By the way, you don't get to make that up. Some, today, would claim to be living like Jesus, but they are ignoring what the Bible teaches about Him. He was love, but He also never excused sin. He demanded repentance and change in our lives. Although He loved and forgave, it was always in the context of "Go and sin no more." So let's be honest when we claim to follow His example.

He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked. (1 John 2:6)

It means He knows what we are going through.

- He experienced SORROW - *Matthew 26:37*
- He experienced ADOLESCENCE - *Luke 2:40*
- He experienced HUNGER - *Luke 4:2*
- He experienced WEARINESS - *Luke 8:23*
- He experienced POVERTY - *Luke 9:58*
- He experienced TEMPTATION - *Matthew 4; Hebrews 4:15*
- He got ANGRY (righteously so), and SAD, and FRUSTRATED

ILLUS - Gold City quartet song - "The Search is Over" has a verse: "He knows what you're goin' through. He's walked in your shoes. And He's felt the pain, 'til His tears fell like rain and His heart broke in two. He knows how it feels alone, when all of His friends were gone. And He walked up that hill, doing His Father's will, to die for you.

MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL - it means we can be forgiven. Our sins are paid for.

For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: (Romans 8:3)

JOKE - A Sunday School teacher had just concluded her lesson and wanted to make sure she had made her point. She said, "Can anyone tell me what you must do before you can obtain forgiveness of sin?" There was a short pause and then, from the back of the room, a small boy spoke up. "Sin," he said. (Bits and Pieces, May, 1991)

We may giggle, but the sad fact is none of us has any problem with that, do we?

We ALL need forgiveness. The longer I live, and the more I talk with people about these things, the more I learn that this is understood by us all. We may deny it outwardly, but inwardly we all realize it. We are sinners. We are imperfect, and fall short of the standard of our perfect God.

That is, after all, what the Bible teaches - *All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23 KJV)*

ILLUS - I once listened to a sermon where the speaker was talking about how to tell others about Jesus. He was discussing the fact that the gospel, the story of Jesus, is "good news." I remember one thing in particular which he said. He spoke of how we are all sinners, and in need of forgiveness. When he got to

that point - we are all sinners, he said, "That is not good news... that is not even news." And it's not news, is it? We all know it. We need forgiveness for we fall so short.

The good news is that forgiveness is there for you, and it's there because of what Jesus, a MAN, did in the flesh!

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace. (Ephesians 1:7 NIV)

When you were dead in your sins... God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins. (Colossians 2:13 NIV)

I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake. (1 John 2:12 KJV)

ILLUS - The parable of the prodigal son (cf. *Luke 15:11f*) is a great picture of the forgiveness you have available in Christ. The prodigal sinned in every conceivable way. He is a picture of misery and ruin. Yet the father RAN to forgive him when he but turned to Him and asked.

The same is available to you, if you will just ask.

For you, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive; and abundant in mercy to all that call upon you. (Psalm 86:5 NKJV)

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

Conclusion:

Wonderful truth! Jesus is not only God, He is also man - one of us!

He is, as John described *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (1 John 1:1)*

Therefore, we can have fellowship with Him (vs. 3), and we can have joy that comes no other way (vs. 4).

All because of the man, Christ Jesus... Whom the Bible describes as *the same yesterday, today, and forever*. We look back, and see Him in our past... we look around, and see that He is still here, saving the lost and loving the saved, and we look ahead and see all eternity spent with Him.

We, the members of FBC see that... I see that... the question is, do YOU see it? Do you know this man, Jesus? Do you KNOW HIM?

Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. 22 Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name? 23 And then I will declare to them, I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness! (Matthew 7:21-23 NKJV)

This man, Jesus is in the past, the present, and the future. We look back, around, and ahead, and see Him. But none of that matters to you if you don't look into your own heart and see Him there. DO YOU KNOW HIM?

Chapter 34. Like Never Before

READ - *Nehemiah 8:13-18*

TEXT - *So the whole assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and sat under the booths; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day the children of Israel had not done so. And there was very great gladness. (Nehemiah 8:17 NKJV)*

THEME - The Word, obeyed immediately and continually, brings great joy.

Introduction:

In our previous study, we learned that *chapter 8* describes the wonderful event when the people of Israel gathered to hear Ezra read the Word of God. The key verse of chapter may well be *vs. 1* - *Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book...*

In that previous study, we learned about the primacy of the Book, and we learned about the proclamation of the book. This passage speaks to both of those thoughts - the Bible is supreme in every way. It is the Word of God and is therefore crucial to our lives. Here at FBC WE BELIEVE in the inspiration, inerrancy, authority, and sufficiency of the Bible. It is our guidebook... our lamp... our map... our instruction manual. It is all we need for faith and practice.

The Bible is also to be proclaimed, and in the example given here we receive some valuable insights into not only how that was done, but also in how we can continue to do it today. It was READ... it was TRANSLATED... it was EXPLAINED... until the people UNDERSTOOD. (cf. *vs. 8*)

And, we learned of some of the results that occurred when the Book was brought forth and proclaimed in this manner:

1. We learned that it brought UNDERSTANDING. (cf. *vss. 2,3,7,8*)
2. We learned that it brought PENITENTIAL SORROW. (cf. *vs. 9*)
3. We learned that it brought JOY. (cf. *vss. 10-12*)

Let us conclude our glimpse into *chapter 8* by noticing a couple more thoughts about what happened when they "brought forth the Book" - a couple of thoughts about what we can expect when the Bible becomes central in our lives:

The Word brought OBEDIENCE.

cf. *vss. 13-17*

Notice that on the second day of this great celebration, they continued to study the Bible (cf. *vs. 13*), and as they read they found a particular thing that they were supposed to be doing. They were supposed to be celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles during that month. (cf. *Leviticus 23:37-43*)

Now, we could spend some time, this morning, on the Feast of Tabernacles, and what it meant. I could take the time to describe how the children of Israel would build temporary shelters on the flat roofs of their homes, or in the streets, and that for the duration of the celebration, would camp out in those shelters. I could take the time to describe how the purpose of this event was much like our Old Fashioned Sunday service last Lord's Day. It was a time for looking back and remembering all God had done for them in delivering them, and bringing them together into the land... it was harvest time, and therefore a time for

looking around and thanking God for the blessings of His continual provision and blessing... and it was also a time to look ahead to all God had promised He would yet do.

We COULD take the time to look at those things, but we won't. I leave that to you in your personal study of your Bible. I want us to notice one very simple truth this morning, instead:

They read a requirement from God in His Word, and they IMMEDIATELY OBEYED IT.

Now I imagine some of you sitting here this morning are thinking to yourselves, "Well... DUH!" Perhaps you are thinking that we should find something a little deeper than that from this passage... a little more cerebral and thought provoking.

But the simple and vital truth for us to see this morning is that they READ the Bible... they HEARD the Bible... they UNDERSTOOD the Bible, and that led to their OBEYING the Bible. We need get no deeper than that, until we get the significance of that!

ILLUS - New pastor came to a church, and preached the same message every week. A couple of people took him aside and asked why he was preaching the same message every week, and he replied, "When the church starts living that one, I'll move on to another."

If these people had read and heard and understood, but not obeyed, there would have been no lasting results here... there would have been no revival. DOING is the key.

for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified (Romans 2:13 NKJV)

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; 24 for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. 25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. (James 1:22-25 NKJV)

Now let me make a couple of observations about this:

1. IMMEDIATE obedience is desirable.

These people wasted no time between hearing and obeying. Neither should we.

When you hear the Bible say you are lost without Christ, and that the only hope you have of heaven is to receive Him as your personal Savior, there is nothing to wait for... nothing to think about... tomorrow you may die - receive Him NOW. IMMEDIATE OBEDIENCE is the key.

When you hear the Bible say, young Christian, that baptism is commanded after salvation, then there is nothing further to think about. The Bible says it, DO IT! IMMEDIATE OBEDIENCE is the key.

When you hear the Bible say to give up that particular sin that you cling to, then GIVE IT UP. IMMEDIATE OBEDIENCE is the key.

Now notice that I didn't say, IMMEDIATE OBEDIENCE to the pastor... or to any other man or woman on earth. You are right to question what I teach and compare it to the infallible source of truth you hold in your hand - the Bible. But the Bible cannot be questioned, and when it speaks clearly, we obey - immediately.

2. CONTINUING obedience is desirable.

There is an interesting verse here... our text verse... which is full of implications for us in 21st century American Christianity - READ vs. 17.

I wonder, what does the Bible mean when it says that *"since the days of Joshua until that day the children of Israel had not done so."*

Is this passage teaching that they had been ignoring the feast of tabernacles all those years since Joshua had led them in the conquest of Canaan? Is it fathomable that godly leaders like David and Solomon and Hezekiah and Josiah, or Samuel the godly priest and prophet, would have allowed such an oversight to take place?

And what do we do about the accounts that show just the opposite? cf. *2 Chronicles 8:13, 1 Kings 8:2,65; 2 Chronicles 7:9*, and esp. *Ezra 3:4* where Ezra, himself, had led them in the celebration of this feast when the altar had been completed in 536 B.C.

The correct interpretation, then, cannot be that they had not celebrated it since Joshua, but rather that they had not celebrated it in such a manner, since Joshua. The picture in this passage is of enthusiastic, joyful, and community-wide celebration and obedience. The leaders led and the people agreed, and ALL took part - in a spirit of celebration and joy. We might paraphrase a part of vs. 17 as "they celebrated the feast of the tabernacles LIKE NEVER BEFORE!"

QUOTE - It was not the fact of the celebration that was so special but the way they celebrated, for it appears that everybody participated enthusiastically. Because every family made a booth, some of the people had to move from the houses into the streets and squares of the city. Apparently in previous years, not all the Jews had made booths and lived in them for the week of the feast. They had given only "token" acknowledgment of the feast. Furthermore, the joyful attitude of the people was beyond anything the nation had ever seen. It was truly a week of joyful celebration that brought glory to the Lord." (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Determined* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996), 103.)

You know what happens with some Christians? They start off with a bang and end with a whimper. They obey loudly and joyfully at first, and less and less as days go by. Rather than being like Paul who ran harder and harder the closer he got to the prize (cf. "I keep after my body... I so run... I press toward the mark for the prize...") until he could finally say, *I have kept the faith and finished the course...* rather than being like him, too many are like Demas, who ran well for a while and then sat down (*Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world.*)

Some of these people had celebrated this feast before... and often. Some of them had no doubt attended the celebration Ezra had led years earlier. But apparently they hadn't celebrated it "like this" until now. What stirred their hearts? What renewed their obedience? What fired their souls anew? They heard the Word... understood the Word... and OBEYED the Word - some for the first time, and some with renewed emphasis.

We need to obey the Bible immediately when we understand it. And we need to obey the Bible CONTINUOUSLY once we understand it. Too many believers have a 'been there, done that' attitude toward the Bible. And as a result, they start with a bang and end with a whimper.

ILLUS - I believe the people who have helped me the most in my walk with God have been older saints who have stayed the course. Last Lord's Day, we celebrated Old Fashioned Sunday, and we had a lot of folks drop in and visit on that day. Nice. My aunt and uncle who attended here years ago, and now attend another church in the area faithfully (BTW - they are a wonderful example of believers who keep running well into their senior years), visited and I spoke with them for a minute while they looked over the antique car display. My aunt looked over the crowd under the tent and fixated on one tall gray headed man who was unknown to me. She pointed to him and said, "Doesn't he look like Pa McCoy?" Now, I doubt there is anybody left in this church except maybe Debbie who would know that name. I did, though. Pa and Ma McCoy were what we called them, and when I was a child, they were aged saints in this place. Every Wednesday evening, when I teach from the little home made pulpit that clips over the edge of the pews here, I think of two people - my grandfather who made that thing,

and Pa McCoy, whom he made it for. I can still see that white haired old man standing and teaching Sunday School from that little pulpit. Pa McCoy used to mow the lawn here. Of course there was no riding mower then - he used a push mower. I'm told that he and Ma were working here one day - his last day. He was mowing and she was puttering about doing other things. She noticed a long period of time where the mower appeared to remain in the same place, and turned to see Pa laying flat out on the ground. He had dropped dead mowing the lawn for Jesus.

I have become a fan of Twitter, and look at it everyday. One of the people I follow on there is pastor John Piper. He recently tweeted about the things we're discussing: "God's response to the typical Western retirement years: "Fool, how did all this pointless play put my glory on display?"

That Tweet really convicted me, because as is obvious to even the most casual observer, I'm at the age now where retirement is starting to beckon. I hope and pray God will deliver me from that temptation. I want to serve until I drop. I don't want to retire until I get to heaven.

Christian, here is the challenge to you and I, today - especially to those of us getting along in years - obey the Bible immediately when we understand it... obey the Bible CONTINUOUSLY once we understand it.

I think that is what *vs. 17* describes, and I think it is the reason they celebrated it LIKE NEVER BEFORE.

Continuing Obedience Brought Greater JOY!

GREAT rejoicing. That's what our text says was the result of this obedience.

They HEARD the Word.... they UNDERSTOOD the Word... the OBEYED the Word... then they KEPT OBEYING the Word... and the RESULT? JOY... GREAT JOY...

Some believers, the older they get, the happier they are in the Lord. They keep obeying and it keeps getting better - the joy of the Lord is their strength - not just at the beginning of the journey, but increasingly until the end.

Such believers live their lives according to that old gospel song:

If it keeps gettin' better and better O Lord,
I don't know what I'm gonna do!

Some believers get crankier and crankier the older they get.

Which do you want to be?

QUOTE (re: JOY) - "When I think upon my God," wrote composer Franz Josef Hayden, 'my heart is so full that the notes dance and leap from my pen and since God has given me a cheerful heart, it will be pardoned me that I serve Him with a cheerful spirit.'" (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Determined* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996), 101.)

We tend to think of obedience as a requirement. These people found it to be a source of GREAT REJOICING. And so, too, will we, when we obey not just once, but continuously - everyday until He comes for us. (cf. *vs. 17*)

Conclusion:

Well, let's conclude our discussion of *chapter 8*. In this chapter we see a people who turned with renewed emphasis to the Book. They HEARD it... UNDERSTOOD it... and OBEYED it. And it brought renewed interest in the things of God. It brought joy... joy unspeakable and full of glory... GREAT JOY.

May I challenge you, whether a new believer or an aged saint, to turn with renewed dedication to the Bible. Read it... Understand it... Obey it... Rejoice in it... and do these things over and over and over again - continuously - until Jesus calls you home.

Chapter 35. Digging Deeper - Soteriology

READ - *Ephesians 2:1-10*

TEXT - *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9 NKJV)*

THEME - Salvation is only by grace through faith. There is nothing we do to earn or obtain it.

Introduction:

We continue digging deeper into our statement of faith this morning. That statement of faith, is available for your reading pleasure online as Article 2 of our church constitution. I encourage you to familiarize yourself with it by going there and reading it. If you do not have access to it online, it is also available in printed form in the little membership guide booklet, copies of which are provided in the foyer.

Now, some weeks ago we dug deeper into the subject of Bibliology, based on the statement "WE BELIEVE in the inspiration, inerrancy, authority, and sufficiency of the Scriptures, consisting of the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments." Then, for the last couple of studies we looked at Christology, considering the statement: "WE BELIEVE in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ and that He is both fully God and fully man."

Today, I'd like to dig a little deeper into what we believe concerning soteriology, or more plainly, what we believe about the doctrine of salvation. In doing so, we'll touch on a few lines from our statement of faith:

WE BELIEVE in the substitutionary death of Christ and in His literal, bodily resurrection from the dead.

WE BELIEVE in salvation by grace alone, through faith in the finished, redemptive work of Christ alone, and that no works of man, however good, need to be or can be added for salvation, evidence of salvation appears in the holy fruits of repentance, faith and newness of life.

WE BELIEVE in the eternal salvation of all who put their faith in Christ; that all who are truly born again are kept secure by God the Father.

Although we read *Ephesians 2:1-10* this morning, let's concentrate on vs. 8 as our text, and to guide our thoughts, let's break it down into three distinct phrases - "You have been saved," "by grace," "through faith."

"You have been saved"

(There is a need for salvation, and a provision for salvation.)

There are many divisions between people. Some are Republicans and some are Democrats. Some like Facebook and some prefer Google+ or Twitter. Some say poTAYto and some, poTAHto. In our community, there are those who root for the Waterloo Vikings, while others root for the Rootstown Rovers (who are 5-0 BTW!). I am a Cleveland Browns fan, while some of you misinformed ones root for the Pittsburgh Steelers. Yes, there are many areas of life on this planet where we are divided.

ILLUS - It is no different today than at any other time in history. Paul found himself dragged before the council. We learned of it in our recent studies in *Acts*. (cf. *But when Paul perceived that the one part were Sadducees, and the other Pharisees... (Acts 23:6 KJV)*) Basically, he pitted the one group against the other.

For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." (1 Corinthians 1:11-12 NKJV) (NOTE - The Message makes that particularly clear - *You're all picking sides, going around saying, "I'm on Paul's side," or "I'm for Apollos," or "Peter is my man," or "I'm in the Messiah group." (1 Corinthians 1:11-12, The Message)*

Well, allow me to make a comment that may, at first blush, sound arrogant and uncaring - allow me to tell you of a division that the Bible speaks quite clearly about - there are only two kinds of people in this world:

1. The saved
2. The lost

If those were simply my opinions and thoughts, then they WOULD be arrogant and uncaring. If some man-made religion taught that, it WOULD be arrogant and uncaring. But that is the clear and unchanging teaching we see in the pages of the Bible - the 66 books which we already learned to be the inspired, inerrant, holy, unchanging, and perfect revelation of the mind of God.

It is the BIBLE that declares to us that there are not many WAYS to get to heaven - ONLY ONE - *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." (John 14:6 NKJV)*

It is the BIBLE that declares to us that there are not many PATHS - ONLY ONE - *"Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it." (Matthew 7:13-14 NKJV)*

It is the BIBLE that declares to us that there are not many SAVIORS - ONLY ONE - *there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12 ESV)*

He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 John 5:12 NKJV)

And so, the first thing we are reminded from the phrase "YOU HAVE BEEN SAVED" is that there is a need for salvation. (We'll discuss this more in a minute.)

First, some other things we learn from this phrase:

1. God has provided the means of salvation.

In addition to what we're already discussing, there is another line from our statement of faith that helps the MEANS of salvation:

WE BELIEVE in the substitutionary death of Christ and in His literal, bodily resurrection from the dead.

HIS SUBSTITUTIONARY DEATH - that's the MEANS of salvation. Faith in the FINISHED REDEMPTIVE WORK OF CHRIST alone - that's the MEANS of salvation.

We remember it often in the observance of the Lord's Table here at FBC. We remember his DEATH, which paid the price for our sins.

For you know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors. And the ransom he paid was not mere gold or silver. It was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God. (1 Peter 1:18–19 NLT)

But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:7 NKJV)

2. Salvation is a "present possession" of the believer.

Note that it doesn't say "will be saved" but "you HAVE BEEN saved." Present possession!

Now, you don't need to know any Greek to understand your Bible. The English translations we have available to us today are wonderfully accurate, if we'll just take the time to read them! But sometimes, just sometimes, the Greek adds a clarity that thrills the soul. For example:

"Saved" is, in Greek, the "perfect passive participle". This is important because it points to a completed action with a continuing result. So, there is a component of our salvation which is "point in time." There was a "point in time" when you became SAVED.

Do you remember a point in time? What is the "point in time" when you were saved?

3. Once obtained, that salvation is a continuing possession of the believer.

Remember we said the perfect passive participle describes a completed action WITH A CONTINUING RESULT? So salvation is something that starts at a point in time, and CONTINUES! GLORY!

QUOTE - (Jamieson, Fausset, Brown Commentary) "Translate as in *Ephesians 2:5*, 'Ye are in a saved state.'"

This is a GLORIOUS TRUTH! Think what it means to you! It means that once obtained, salvation cannot be lost. That once in a saved state, you cannot be in an unsaved state.

BTW - there are many other verses that support this:

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. (John 5:24 NKJV)

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. (John 10:27-29 NKJV)

Our text is: *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9 NKJV)*

And in considering just a portion of that passage, the phrase "you have been saved," we see that there is a NEED for salvation, the PROVISION of salvation, and the PRESENT and CONTINUING POSSESSION of salvation, once attained.

"By grace"

(It is wholly and entirely a gift of God.)

Definition - Usually we hear "grace" defined as the unmerited favor of God.

Consider the religions of the world. What do they consider necessary in order for one to have a relationship with God (if they even make allowances for such a thing)? We could spend time talking about various religions, but we would find that they all fall into two categories:

1. Those that teach salvation by works (all except true Christianity).
2. Christianity, which teaches salvation by grace.

The WORKS take many forms in differing religions:

- Some religions use the "scale of righteousness" - if at the end of your life, your good works outweigh your bad, you are in.
- Some add certain requirements in addition faith. (e.g. the requirement for baptism - foreign to scripture)
- Some teach that if you DO a particular thing you are GUARANTEED paradise - e.g. Islam and martyrdom.

But our text is clear - salvation is by grace alone. Other verses support this as well:

Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; (Titus 3:5)

Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified. (Galatians 2:16)

We mentioned in our 1st point that there is a NEED for salvation. Let's make that more personal now:

YOU NEED SALVATION BECAUSE YOU ARE A SINNER.

Do you deny that?

The Bible makes it clear that you are a sinner, and therefore unable to please God.

1. You are a sinner by nature.

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned: (Romans 5:12)

2. You are a sinner by practice.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8)

3. As a sinner, you cannot reach the mark of God's righteousness, **NO MATTER HOW HARD YOU TRY!**

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; (Romans 3:23)

ILLUS - "A man was traveling on his donkey when he came upon a small fuzzy object lying in the road. He dismounted to look more closely and found a sparrow lying on its back with its scrawny legs thrust upward. At first he thought the bird was dead, but closer investigation proved it to be very much alive. The man asked the sparrow if he was all right. The sparrow replied, 'Yes.' The man said, 'What are you doing lying on your back with your legs pointed towards the sky?' The sparrow responded that he had heard a rumor that the sky was falling, and so he was holding his legs up in support. The man replied, 'You surely don't think that you're going to hold it up with those two scrawny legs, do you?' The sparrow, with a very solemn look, retorted, 'One does the best he can.'"

We are much like that sparrow. No matter how hard we try - even if it is our best effort - it is not good enough. The best effort we can put forth is inadequate to provide what we really need. When the sky is falling, our reaction might be to lift our hands to stop it, but it will do us no good.

WE BELIEVE that all men are sinners by nature and in conduct, and cannot save themselves.

WE BELIEVE in salvation by grace alone, through faith in the finished, redemptive work of Christ alone, and that NO WORKS OF MAN, HOWEVER GOOD, NEED TO BE OR CAN BE ADDED for salvation,

This is SUCH and important point! It is ALL OF GRACE. There is nothing you can do to earn it.

"Through faith"

Our part is simply to believe in Jesus and trust in His finished work.

QUOTE - (Robertson's NT Word Pictures) "Grace" is God's part, "faith" is ours.

And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house. (Acts 16:31)

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

He that believes on him is not condemned: but he that believes not is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3:18)

He that believes on the Son has everlasting life: and he that believes not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abides on him. (John 3:36)

Conclusion:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9 NKJV)

Let's sum this wonderful verse up: You need to be saved and you can be saved by trusting in Jesus. There is no other way.

- There are not may WAYS to get to heaven - ONLY ONE
- There are not may PATHS - ONLY ONE
- There are not many SAVIORS - ONLY ONE

And so I encourage you to examine yourself, whether ye be in the faith. Are you trusting in Jesus alone? Or are you trusting in your own good works?

ARE YOU IN A SAVED STATE?

You can be today. The transaction can happen today. John W. Peterson said it so well in "Heaven Came Down":

Born of the Spirit with life from above
Into God's family divine,
Justified fully thru Calvary's love,
O what a standing is mine!
And the transaction so quickly was made
When as a sinner I came,

Took of the offer of grace He did proffer -
He saved me, O praise His dear name!

Invitation

"You have been saved." I ask it now, with heads bowed and eyes closed, as a question - "HAVE YOU BEEN SAVED?" Are you in a saved state? Do you know you are going to heaven?

If not, let today be day that you take of the offer of grace He does proffer. He'll save you - today.

Baptism, membership, prayer - if the Holy Spirit has spoken to you today, respond as He leads...

Chapter 36. Digging Deeper - Soteriology (Part Two)

READ - *(selected scriptures - see below)*

THEME - A person can LOOK saved and not actually BE saved. We believe in eternal security, but also in a changed life that accompanies salvation, and that demonstrates the reality of the profession.

Introduction:

Let's start with a little Bible study this morning.

READ - *Matthew 13:1-23*

While you think about that passage, let's read a little further - READ - *Matthew 13:24-30*

Is there a similar message? What similar thought comes through from both passages? Let's read another passage - READ - *Matthew 26:17-25*

Is there a similar message between these passages? What similar thought do you see arising? Two more passages, which I'll just quote for you -

Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. 19 They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us. (1 John 2:18-19 NKJV)

If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? 8 But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. (Hebrews 12:7-8 NKJV)

Do you see any similarities between these passages? Is there a common thread that runs throughout?

I would suggest that there is, and that that common thread is this - a person can LOOK saved, and not BE saved.

In the parable of the sowers and the soils, at one point, ALL FOUR looked saved, but in the end, only one was. In the parable of the tares amongst the wheat, the entire point of the parable is that there will be those who only look like believers, but are not true believers, living amongst the true believers, until Jesus comes again. In the narrative regarding Judas we have perhaps the greatest example in the Bible of a man who fooled everyone but God. None of the disciples, at least as far as the Bible reveals, questioned for a moment that it might be Judas. Only Jesus knew. And the passages in *1 John and Hebrews* plainly teach that there are both true and false professions of faith, with corresponding evidence either way.

So, the common thread? A person can LOOK saved, and not actually BE saved.

Last Lord's Day we considered some thoughts from our statement of faith related to salvation.

We spoke from *Ephesians 2:8-9* and learned that salvation is a gift, freely given by our gracious God to all who trust in the finished work of Jesus on the cross, and that once received it can never be lost.

We learned the basis therefore of these thoughts from our statement of faith:

WE BELIEVE in the substitutionary death of Christ and in His literal, bodily resurrection from the dead.

WE BELIEVE in salvation by grace alone, through faith in the finished, redemptive work of Christ alone, and that no works of man, however good, need to be or can be added for salvation, evidence of salvation appears in the holy fruits of repentance, faith and newness of life.

WE BELIEVE in the eternal salvation of all who put their faith in Christ; that all who are truly born again are kept secure by God the Father.

We learned, therefore, about salvation, and the parallel doctrine - eternal security. We learned that once a person is saved, they can never be lost. That is our firm belief here at FBC, because that is what the Word of God teaches.

But anytime we talk about eternal security, questions begin to arise. And this week was no exception. Several issues converged this week to convince me that we were not done with our discussion of soteriology - that we needed to tie up a couple of loose ends. In our Men's Bible study this past week, the question came up - "Are we to consider a person saved who does not change in the slightest after coming to Christ? Same habits... same sins... same lifestyle... NO CHANGE AT ALL. Is such a person saved or not?" Another came to me and directly asked me this week regarding eternal security. And on top of it all, the Holy Spirit convicted me that I completely neglected one particular part of our statement of faith.

So... even though we were to have been in Nehemiah this morning, I never want our method to get in the way of the Holy Spirit's leading, and I believe we have to confront this unfinished business.

What did I neglect from our statement of faith?

WE BELIEVE in salvation by grace alone, through faith in the finished, redemptive work of Christ alone, and that no works of man, however good, need to be or can be added for salvation, EVIDENCE OF SALVATION APPEARS IN THE HOLY FRUITS OF REPENTANCE, FAITH AND NEWNESS OF LIFE.

That last part - EVIDENCE OF SALVATION APPEARS... is vital to understanding this issue.

What We Learned About Salvation and Eternal Security

The Bible says we can KNOW we are saved. (*1 John 5:11-13*)

Salvation results from the FINISHED work of Jesus on the cross. (*Ephesians 2:13, 1 John 1:7, 1 Peter 1:18-21, John 19:30*)

Salvation is a gift, entirely by grace, and cannot be earned. (*Ephesians 2:4-10, Titus 3:4-8, Romans 11:6*)

Salvation is a PRESENT POSSESSION of the believer:

John 5:24 Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.

Jesus not only SAVES, He also KEEPS

2 Timothy 1:12 For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day.

Now I've given you a lot of Bible this morning, and I hope your eyes aren't glazing over. I want us to be clear on what the Bible teaches. We are saved by trusting in the finished work of Christ on the cross. Salvation is a gift given entirely and only because of God's love and grace, and it cannot be earned by anything we think we might do to earn it. It is a GIFT! It is FREE! And once God gives the gift He will never take it away. To be SAVED is to be ETERNALLY SAVED... ETERNALLY SECURE

What I Neglected To Tell You About Eternal Security

There are objections that surface to this teaching, though. Common objections. The same objections over and over. I know, because I used to have the very same objections. Let's see if I can articulate them:

1. What if I sin?

I've had people say it this way - "But what if I sin? I can understand that the blood of Christ cleansed me of my past sin (I.e. Before I believed) but what about sin that occurs AFTER salvation... Won't I be judged for that? What if I sin just a few seconds before I die? Won't I go to hell?"

If you struggle with this objection, you need to memorize *Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.*

Once you've got that verse firmly in your head, flip back a chapter and meditate on *Romans 7*, where Paul vividly confesses his continual struggle with sin. If sinning after salvation sends you to hell, nobody, including Paul, will be in heaven.

You need to remember that when Christ died for your sins, they were ALL future. None of your sins that He died for had been committed yet, and yet He said "IT IS FINISHED" "TETELESTHAI - PAID IN FULL"

You need to understand the timing of salvation - it is a PRESENT POSSESSION, not merely a FUTURE one. Trust Christ and receive eternal life NOW, not later. (cf. *John 5:24 - MEMORIZE THIS VERSE!* I first heard this verse used to support the doctrine of eternal security by Dr. Curtis Hutson, and it was like a bell went off in my head. It's MINE. I ALREADY HAVE IT! Hallelujah. Read that verse over and over and over until that bell goes off for you.

2. What about the guy who claims to be saved and then turns away completely, or the gal who claims to be saved and shows no change in her life at all?

Some might put it like this:

"So, preacher, what you're saying then is that a person can trust Christ at a certain time in his / her life, and then subsequently abandon that belief, and still go to heaven?"

or...

"What you're saying, then, is that a person can be a Christian and live entirely like the lost world... no evidence of salvation being present in their life until the day they die, and still go to heaven?"

"Are you saying, preacher, that such a person is eternally secure?"

Answer - NO, that's NOT what I'm saying at all. And it's not what the Bible teaches. I believe there are two primary answers to this objection in the Bible. Two explanations for this person who "believes" and then later "turns away" or who "believes" and then "lives like the devil" the rest of his / her life:

- a. He was not genuinely saved in the first place.

This would be the explanation seen in *Matthew 13*

ILLUS - Judas demonstrated that it is possible to give every outward appearance of salvation, but be lost.

2 Corinthians 11:13-15 For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. 15 Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.

1 John 2:19 They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.

- b. He is saved, but rebelling against God.

Some people like to use the term "backslidden" to describe this condition.

ILLUS - My experience - Gary Price

Now here is the important thing to understand from the Bible. NO CHRISTIAN can be in such a state without consequences. If you are truly SAVED, you WILL experience the consequences of being in this state. If you do NOT, then it is evidence that you are NOT REALLY SAVED.

In such cases, for example, the Bible says God will chasten. If there is no chastening, i.e. If a person can sin with impunity, he is almost certainly not a believer.

Revelation 3:19 As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.

Hebrews 12:7-8 If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? 8 But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons.

Conclusion:

Consider that portion of our statement of faith which I neglected to touch on last week:

WE BELIEVE in salvation by grace alone, through faith in the finished, redemptive work of Christ alone, and that no works of man, however good, need to be or can be added for salvation, EVIDENCE OF SALVATION APPEARS IN THE HOLY FRUITS OF REPENTANCE, FAITH AND NEWNESS OF LIFE.

Consider that the Bible clearly teaches that a person who is truly saved can never be lost, but once truly saved, there will be evidence of that in their life!

Consider that the Bible clearly teaches a person can LOOK saved, but not BE saved!

I hope that one of two things will happen as you consider these things:

1. Either you will rejoice in understanding that your salvation - that unspeakable gift God gave you in Christ - can NEVER be taken from you!
2. Or, you will take a good hard look at your Christian experience with a view toward ensuring you were ever really saved in the first place.

The first result is desired for all who are truly saved.

The second, for those who show no signs of salvation in their lives.

Some, today, might need to kneel before God in renewed appreciation for the amazing gift of salvation - eternal - unchanging - YOURS!

Some, today, might need to kneel before God and repent of your false profession, your unchanged and unchanging life, and trust Him for real.

WE BELIEVE in salvation by grace alone, through faith in the finished, redemptive work of Christ alone, and that no works of man, however good, need to be or can be added for salvation, EVIDENCE OF SALVATION APPEARS IN THE HOLY FRUITS OF REPENTANCE, FAITH AND NEWNESS OF LIFE.

EVIDENCE OF SALVATION APPEARS! That's what we believe. That's what the Bible teaches. Does it APPEAR in your life?

Chapter 37. What The Bible Will Do For You

READ - *Nehemiah 9*

TEXT - *And they stood up in their place and read from the Book... (vs. 3)*

THEME - Reading the Bible is good, but making it a habit is better.

Introduction:

The Feast of the Tabernacles has concluded. It is over.

Perhaps you recall from our previous studies in *chapter 8* that as part of the celebration of this feast, a great "Bible Conference" had taken place. Ezra had brought forth the book (cf. 8:2), and had read it to the people. That was on the first day of the seventh month (cf. 7:73). It didn't stop there, though, as on the very next day after 6 hours (cf. 8:3) of Bible reading, they came together to read it some more. (cf. 8:13). It didn't stop there, though, for as we came to the end of *chapter 8*, we learned that the reading of the Book continued everyday during the feast. (cf. 8:18)

Now that this great feast, along with the great Bible Conference that took place during its celebration is concluded, I'm guessing the emphasis on the Bible will be slackened... the reading of the Book will be lessened. With the end of the feast will come the end of the Bible in these people's lives, right?

After all, isn't that the way it works with many of us? We get fired up about the importance of God's Word in our daily lives and start reading it. But it only lasts for a bit, and then we lay it aside. Maybe we buy a wonderful new Bible, and set off to make it part of our daily disciplines to read it. We start and go gangbusters for a while, but if asked where that Bible is today, we have to admit it's been laid aside. Maybe our local church provides a reading plan (e.g. The 61 Day Plan), which we dutifully START, but become distracted from, and neglect to finish.

That's the way it works, right? Once the EXCITEMENT of the moment ends, so too does the COMMITMENT? In Nehemiah's day, it would be common to expect, then, that when the excitement of the feast ended, so would the commitment to the WORD?

But not so! For notice 9:3 where we see that they are STILL in the Book. They read from it, on this day after the conclusion of the feast, for 3 hours! And they worshipped for 3 hours! They held a 6 hour church service!

QUOTE - In most churches today, a six-hour service—three hours of preaching and three hours of praying—would probably result in some requests for resignations (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Determined* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996), 107.)

But that's exactly what happened here! They had read the Word for hours and hours now. At the start of the feast, throughout every single day of the feast, and now we see that it has become an ongoing habit in their lives that continued past the conclusion of the feast.

While there are many wonderful lessons from *chapter 9*, the one I'd like for us to spend a few minutes on this morning is simply this - the value of the Bible in our lives, or as our message is entitled today, "What the Bible Will Do For You."

These people were changed. Their lives were vastly and forever influenced by the fact that the Bible had become a habit to them. They had become a people who understood their brokenness before a holy God

(9:1), who understood His requirement that they live separated and holy lives (9:2). They had developed a deep sense of their sinfulness, both by nature and practice (9:2), and they had become a worshipping people (9:3).

What a change had been wrought!

What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought,
Since Jesus came into my heart!
I have light in my soul for which long I had sought,
Since Jesus came into my heart!
(Rufus H. McDaniel, 1914)

We learned about Jesus from our Bibles, and we were forever changed by what we learned there. So, too, were they. And the scope and magnitude of what they had learned can be gleaned from the amazing prayer recorded for us here. As we read that prayer, we need to ask ourselves, "What had these people learned?" And I think we'll discover as we do so, that what the Bible did for them, it does for us, too. Let me share two main lessons that I see in this prayer.

1. Time spent in the Bible will help you to meet and know God.
2. Time spent in the Bible will convince you of how much you need God.

Time Spent in the Bible Will Help You to Meet and Know God.

Notice some of the things they had learned about God as they read. They are the same things we can learn about God as we read our Bibles:

1. God MADE. (vs. 6)

In the beginning God created... (Genesis 1:1)

That's the first thing we learn when we start reading our Bibles. Most who start out reading start at the beginning and that's the first thing we read!

Now our culture laughs at it... a number of scientists (though certainly not all) scoff at it... our government criminalizes it, but that doesn't change the truth of it.

In the beginning God created... (Genesis 1:1)

I submit that we can understand no other part of the Bible without understanding this part.

Some, today, go to great lengths to try and fit the Biblical account into the false theory of evolution. Unfortunate gyrations such as the "gap theory" are posited - the "gap theory" which claims there is a gap of millions of years between *Genesis 1:1 - In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...* and *Genesis 1:2 - and the earth was without form, and void...*, and it was during that lengthy gap that evolution took place. Some try to tell us that the "days" in *Genesis 1* was really eons of time - a notion completely unnecessary if we accept the Biblical account as written, but painfully necessary if we have some need to fit it into the incorrect and erroneous theory of evolution.

Nobody would ever read the Bible and try these silly gyrations to change its meaning if they did not come first with a preconceived belief in the false theory of evolution. Nobody would read "day" and assume "millions of years" unless they had already arrived at a conclusion that "day" is impossible.

But brothers... sisters... if *Genesis 1:1* is not true, then neither is *Romans 5:12* - *Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men... (NKJV)*

We need a Savior because there was a fall. MAN and WOMAN SINNED, and brought sin and death to all of us. DEATH is a result of SIN!

The false, incorrect, and erroneous theory of evolution requires that millions of years of death and dying had to occur before monkeys managed to become men. And so, we have to take *In the beginning God created...* out of our Bibles, and suddenly we find that the entire gospel is affected. *John 3:16* makes no sense if we don't literally accept *Genesis 1*!

You're saying, "Preacher... you're off track... how in the world did we get on this topic - you were supposed to be talking about What the Bible will Do for You! Let's get back on track!"

But I'm not off track, because this kind of thinking does not come from reading the Bible one time and then putting it on the shelf. As we read it over and over and over, it comes together and we see more and more how it is a whole - a unified whole, and that no part of it can be taken in isolation, and no part of it can be neglected or explained away.

So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. (Romans 10:17 (NKJV))

The Bible... especially when we make it a habit in our lives, helps us to know and meet God, and that starts with an understanding that He is our MAKER... our CREATOR..., and that's the first thing they had learned from their Bible study: *You alone are the LORD; You have made heaven, The heaven of heavens, with all their host, The earth and everything on it, The seas and all that is in them... (Nehemiah 9:6 (NKJV))*

2. God PRESERVES. (vs. 6)

Once they understood He had created all that is, they came to understand that He also holds it all together.

They could certainly see it in their world, and their culture - He had made it all, and He was the only explanation for why it yet existed... why they were still there. I heard a preacher say once that there is one word that proves the validity of the Bible, and that is the word "Jew." The very fact that such a people once existed, still exist, and continue to exist, just as the Bible said and says, is amazing evidence of the accuracy of the word. These people knew that God had not only made them as people, and as a special nation, but that God had kept them together - preserved them.

What will the Bible do for you? Especially when you make it a habit in your life? It will remind you that God is the One who not only saved you, but the One who keeps you and preserves you every step of the way and every minute of the day.

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, And to present you faultless Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, 25 To God our Savior, Who alone is wise, Be glory and majesty, Dominion and power, Both now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24-25 NKJV)

He saves me! He keeps me! HE PRESERVES ME. That's what I learn about my God when I make the Bible a habit in my life, and that's what it will do for you, too.

3. God PROMISED. (vss. 7-8)

Now, no doubt these people had a knowledge of their history that had been handed down orally, and they had some knowledge of Abraham and God's call on his life, and promises to him.

But as they read the Bible, the covenant... the PROMISE of God was so clear that they couldn't help but praise Him for it now.

You are the LORD God, Who chose Abram, And brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans, And gave him the name Abraham; 8 You found his heart faithful before You, And made a covenant with him... (Nehemiah 9:7-8 NKJV)

They had read the promise of God to Abraham in *Genesis 22:18 - In your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed...*

The Bible is a book of promises from a God Who loves you and wants only good for you. But if we don't read it we don't know about those wonderful promises. And if we read it just a time or two, or read a few passages and put it back on the shelf, we never get to many of those promises. Wonderful promises, like:

Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know. (Jeremiah 33:3 NKJV)

I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. (John 14:18 KJV)

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8 NKJV)

If you ask anything in My name, I will do it. (John 14:14 NKJV)

Standing on the promises I cannot fail,
By the living Word of God I shall prevail!

Hundreds, maybe THOUSANDS of promises from a God Who loves you are in this Book! But unless we read it, and make the reading of it HABITUAL in our lives, we will miss so many of those wonderful promises. And as we read of those promises over and over, we'll find them getting into our heart and mind so that when the time comes we need them, we have them. Just the right promise at just the right time to encourage and help us get through the hard places of this life.

ILLUS - Our sister Jill is experiencing the last few moments with her father, as he is now just a step or two this side of heaven. Whether you are saved or lost, saying goodbye to a beloved friend and family member is a "hard place" in this life, isn't it? But we can go to promises like *1 Thessalonians 4:15-18 - We tell you this directly from the Lord: We who are still living when the Lord returns will not meet him ahead of those who have died. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the Christians who have died will rise from their graves. Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever. So encourage each other with these words. (NLT)*

How glad the believer who, even in the midst of such sorrow, has such a wonderful promise from God's Word to rest upon! And how sad for the person who faces such a hard place, but stopped reading before they got to *1 Thessalonians 4!*

These people had learned of very specific things God had promised their ancestor Abraham and their nation. That's what the Bible will do for you and me, too - give insight into all God promises us!

Well, let's move on to my second point.

Time Spent in the Bible will Convince You of How Much You Need God.

Not only did their time in the Book help them to meet and know God, it also taught them how very much they needed Him.

They had learned how, in spite of all God had done in creating and preserving, and promising, their ancestors had forsaken Him!

They acted proudly, hardened their necks, and did not heed your commands. (vs. 16)

They refused to obey (vs. 17)

They were not mindful of your wonders (vs. 17)

They worshipped other gods... gods they had made with their hands.. (vs. 18)

Repeatedly, even after God had blessed them abundantly and given them a home and a nation and a land, they were disobedient and rebelled (vs. 26)

Repeatedly, after they had sinned, and been judged for that sin, and confessed and gotten right with God... over and over *THEY AGAIN DID EVIL BEFORE YOU* (vs. 28)

And now, although they were once again in the land of promise, they were slaves - what a plaintive statement is vs. 36 - *Here we are, servants today! And the land that you gave to our fathers, to eat its fruit and its bounty, here we are, servants in it!*

They had clearly learned of the goodness and grace of God in all His dealings with Him. But they had also learned that in spite of that grace, they were incapable of living for Him without His constant care and help.

I'm not going to spend much time on this part of their prayer, except to say that the things they learned about their need for God, are just as true of you and I. It is wonderful that we can read our Bibles and come to know things about God. But it is VITAL that when we read the Bible we come to understand how very much we NEED HIM.

And that, too, comes most commonly from repeated exposure - making it a habit - hearing and reading it over and over.

I'm sure there are some who have come to realize their need of a Savior from a single exposure to the gospel message. But there are many more, I believe who have needed to hear it over and over, in a variety of forms, and from a variety of messengers, before they came to accept it.

I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. (1 Corinthians 3:6 KJV)

Soul winners - keep sharing the gospel - don't give up because it is rejected once or twice - keep sharing. And seekers - those who just can't quite get their heads around it - keep reading - keep asking questions - the more you hear and read and learn and listen - the more convinced you will be of your need for God.

And without that conviction, nobody comes to know Him.

Conclusion:

As I conclude, allow me to revisit my first point for just a second, because I purposefully left out a couple of the things they had come to understand about God.

For example, I neglected to mention vs. 9 where they acknowledge God had SEEN the affliction of their ancestors. And we should remind ourselves that no affliction happens in our lives that He does not see.

And I left out vs. 12, God had LED them. Oh how good to remember that He leads us - every step of the way.

He leadeth me, O blessed thought!
O words with heav'nly comfort fraught!
Whate'er I do, where'er I be
Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.

Sometimes mid scenes of deepest gloom,
Sometimes where Eden's bowers bloom,
By waters still, over troubled sea,
Still 'tis His hand that leadeth me.

And when my task on earth is done,
When by Thy grace the vict'ry's won,
E'en death's cold wave I will not flee,
Since God through Jordan leadeth me.

I did not mention vs. 13, where they acknowledged that God had SPOKEN. Our whole topic this morning can be summed up in that - GOD HAS SPOKEN in this book we call the Bible - we need to make it a habit in our lives to read and hear what He has said.

But for sake of time let me conclude with one last thing they had learned about God as they studied their Bibles - they had learned that God CAME DOWN (cf. vs. 13).

ILLUS - There is a pastor and teacher in our area who is well known around the world for his Bible teaching. He pastors the Parkside Church just north of us here, and I get a lot from his teaching. Some years ago I listened to a series of sermons he preached on Nehemiah. They were excellent. When I determined to teach this series on Nehemiah here, I remembered his series. However, I feared that if I went back and listened to it, I would be tempted to pull too much of his thoughts, and so I did not do that. Maybe when I'm done with this series, I'll go back and relisten to what he had to say. I DID, however, write him a quick email and ask if he had any advice on preaching through Nehemiah. He wrote back and shared a couple of resources that he thought were helpful, and then he offered this word of advice - "If I were to redo the series I would be working much harder than before to ensure that I lead people on to Christ."

God came down. These people learned that when they made the Bible central and a habit in their lives.

And we cannot read our Bibles very long before we learn the same truth - God came down.

ILLUS - We will have our first Christmas Cantata practice today right after the worship service concludes. We'll be singing about that wonderful truth - God came down.

Down from His glory,
Ever living story,
My God and Savior came,
And Jesus was His name.
Born in a manger,
To His own a stranger,
A Man of sorrows, tears and agony.

What condescension,
 Bringing us redemption;
That in the dead of night,
 Not one faint hope in sight,
God, gracious, tender,
 Laid aside His splendor,
Stooping to woo, to win, to save my soul.

O how I love Him! How I adore Him!
My breath, my sunshine, my all in all!
The great Creator became my Savior,
 And all God's fulness dwelleth in Him.
Source: <http://www.hymnal.net/hymn.php/h/82#ixzz1aHGe4ITD>

The Book had become central to their lives, and they had become a people who made it a habit. That Book had helped them to meet and understand God. And that Book had convinced them of their need for God.

What about you. Do you know Him? Do you have the slightest idea how desperately you need Him?

Chapter 38. Digging Deeper - Pneumatology

READ - *John 14:16-26*

TEXT - *Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. (John 14:17)*

THEME - The Holy Spirit is the third member of the Godhead, who indwells every believer, and gives guidance and power when we walk in step with Him.

Introduction:

We have been taking a look at the FBC Statement of Faith... not necessarily in order, but with the hope of obtaining greater understanding and clarity on what we believe here at FBC. We've looked at our beliefs regarding the Bible, Christ, and Salvation. Today, I wanted to start looking into what our statement of faith has to say about the Holy Spirit, and what we believe about Him.

And the first thing I noticed was how very little our statement of faith has to say on the subject. When we pulled this statement of faith together a few years back, we did our best at a first cut. However, I'm learning throughout this series that it is not quite perfect. And the paucity of clarity on pneumatology (how's that for word use?) is an example of where it's lacking.

The only reference to the Holy Spirit in our statement of faith is in the very first line:

WE BELIEVE there is one and only one living and true God, and that in the unity of the Godhead there are three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

"AND THE HOLY SPIRIT!!" That's all our statement of faith has to say about the subject! Obviously, that is insufficient, and sometime in the future we need to address that deficiency in our statement of faith, but for now, let's pretend that it says more. For there is SO much more that we need to discuss about the pneumatology, or the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

There is so much, in fact, that I don't believe we can come close to tackling the topic in a single message, and won't even try. We'll start this morning, though with two simple truths about the Holy Spirit:

1. The Holy Spirit Exists
2. The Holy Spirit indwells every believer.

The Holy Spirit exists.

To make such a statement is to remind ourselves that we believe in a thing called the trinity, a truth which IS included in our statement of faith.

The word trinity does not appear in our Bibles. Yet the truth of the trinity is clearly taught.

DEFINITION - "We teach that there is but one living and true God (*Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 45:5-7; 1 Corinthians 8:4*), an infinite, all knowing Spirit (*John 4:24*), perfect in all His attributes, one in essence,

eternally existing in three Persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (*Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14*) - each equally deserving worship and obedience." (MacArthur Study Bible, pg. 2192)

The Holy Spirit exists as the third person of the trinity. He is not some "force" like in Star Wars, but a real person - a member of the Godhead - just as much God as the Father and the Son.

The Holy Spirit is seen in creation - *Genesis 1:1-2* (as is God the Father, and God the Son *John 1:1-3*)

From the beginning of our Bibles, we learn about this Person, the Holy Spirit, or the Holy Ghost. He exists. He is called by many names:

Holy Spirit
Holy Ghost
Spirit of God
Spirit of Christ
Comforter
Spirit of Truth
Spirit of the Lord

The Holy Spirit exists. There is much more we could say about Him, but for today's purposes, understand that He exists.

The Holy Spirit Indwells Every Believer.

When it comes to describing the Holy Spirit's relationship with you and I, there are basically three terms used in our Bibles:

1. There is the "baptism" of the Holy Spirit.
2. And there is the "indwelling" of the Holy Spirit.
3. And the "filling" of the Holy Spirit.

Much confusion exists about the Holy Spirit, and it is often caused by confusion over these 3 terms. For example:

Some believe that after you get saved, you need to pray for the Holy Ghost to come - you need to pray for the baptism of the Holy Ghost. Do you?

Some think that receiving the Holy Ghost into your life is a second blessing - something that happens only to some Christians after they are saved. Is that correct?

Some teach that the "sign gifts" which were given to the apostles in the New Testament (things like tongues, healing, etc.) are given to Christians today to indicate they have received that extra bit of the Holy Spirit. Is this correct?

Let's see if we can make sense of what the Bible says about this by looking at those three words - baptism, indwelling, and filling:

1. What is the Baptism of the Holy Ghost?

The Baptism of the Holy Spirit is a HISTORICAL EVENT that took place at Pentecost.

QUOTE (notes taken from lecture by Dr. Harry Carr - instructor at Midwestern Baptist College) "The baptism of the Holy Spirit is an altogether different thing than the filling of the Spirit, in that the Baptism is historic. It refers to the constitution of the Church at Pentecost. There are 7 (possibly 8) verses in the Bible referring to this event. Five are prophetic, one is historic, and two are didactic, or teaching

passages. All point to *Acts 2:1-3*, which is the historic account of the baptism of the Holy Ghost. When the Holy Ghost descended at Pentecost, ushering in the Church age, he baptized all believers into the body of Christ."

- John the Baptist mentioned it as being future:

I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: (Matthew 3:11) cf. (Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33)

- Jesus mentioned it as being in the very near future:

For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence. (Acts 1:5)

- It occurred on Pentecost:

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. (Acts 2:1-3)

- The only other verses refer to it as being in the past, and an event which each individual Christian takes part in through salvation:

For by one Spirit are (were) we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:13)

Here is the important point - NOWHERE IN THE BIBLE ARE WE COMMANDED TO BE BAPTIZED IN THE HOLY SPIRIT because it's automatic for the Christian.

SO, you don't need to seek it. SEEK CHRIST AND YOU'LL HAVE IT! It's part of the package when you become a Christian!

2. What is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit?

It is important to note that the Baptism of the Holy Ghost marked a change in how the Holy Spirit works in our lives. In the Old Testament (before *Acts 2:1-3*), the Holy Spirit CAME UPON people. In other words, He equipped and empowered them for particular things as needed. However, our text points out that this changed after Pentecost. His ministry now is one of INDWELLING. He WAS with us (pre-Pentecost), but He is NOW IN US (post-Pentecost).

The Bible teaches this great truth two ways - as a positive, and as a negative.

- POSITIVE - It is something EVERY CHRISTIAN already has. ("I believe the Holy Spirit indwells EVERY BELIEVER...")

And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. (John 14:16-17)

Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? (1 Corinthians 3:16)

What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? (1 Corinthians 6:19)

That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us. (2 Timothy 1:14)

- **NEGATIVE** - If you DON'T have the Holy Spirit indwelling you, then **YOU ARE NOT A CHRISTIAN!**

But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. (Romans 8:9)

The point is this - if you are saved, then you were BAPTIZED into the body of Christ when you were saved, and you were immediately and forever INDWELT by the Spirit of God at that moment.

So, we DO NOT PRAY be baptised by the Holy Spirit or indwelt by the Holy Spirit. There is no more of the Holy Spirit for you to get! He is a PERSON, not a LIQUID. You have ALL OF HIM from the moment of your salvation.

3. What, then, is the FILLING of the Holy Spirit?

We are nowhere taught to seek the baptism of, or the indwelling of, the Holy Spirit. BUT, the Bible DOES command that we be filled with Spirit - *And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; (Ephesians 5:18)*

We ARE commanded to do this, so what does it mean? Is it possible to be only partially filled? Like a glass can be half-filled with water? Is it possible, then, to be empty - like my gas tank so often seems to be?

The answer is YES... but not quite the way you might think. We have all the Spirit we're going to get, so if we're running on empty it's not because we need more of Him. What we need is more of His influence, or more of His control in our lives. We need to SURRENDER more to Him.

The word "filled" in our Bibles simply means "controlled by" or "influenced by" or "under the sway of." Some examples:

And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, (Luke 4:28)

Does that mean that they had wrath spilling out of their ears? NO - it means they were under the control of that emotion - wrath had taken control of them.

ILLUS - I remember reading of an incident of road rage that occurred in Akron some years ago. A man was cut off by another driver, and so enraged that he chased the driver to the next intersection. While they sat at the light, the angry and offended party got out of his car, yanked open the door of the other party, dragged him from his car and through him into the path of oncoming traffic where he was killed. This man was filled with wrath - he was completely under its control.

The same Greek word is used of Zacharias in *Luke 1:67, And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost...*

But because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart. (John 16:6)

Was sorrow leaking out of their hearts like a liquid? Were their heart valves leaking sorrow? NO - this means that they were under the control of that emotion - sorrow had taken control of them and was influencing them.

The same Greek word is used in *Ephesians 5:18, And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.*

There is a third Greek word translated "filled" or "full" in our Bibles, and it is seen in *Acts 13:10, And said, O full of all subtilty and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?*

That same word is used of Barnabus in *Acts 11:24, For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord.*

AND SO, all of these examples teach us that being FILLED with the Spirit simply means "BE CONTROLLED BY" or "BE INFLUENCED BY" the Spirit of God. Another example (one of my favorites):

And the whole city was filled with confusion: and having caught Gaius and Aristarchus, men of Macedonia, Paul's companions in travel, they rushed with one accord into the theatre. (Acts 19:29)

Clearly, this means the city was "UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF" or "CONTROLLED BY" confusion.

ILLUS - Some of you may remember my brother, who is now a Lieutenant in the State Highway Patrol. One of the things he has had to do many times is to pull people over and give them a sobriety test. Perhaps they were weaving around on the road. Or perhaps they wrecked their vehicle and as he talked with them he noticed evidence of inebriation. When he comes across such people he makes them do three things. He takes his pen from his pocket and holds it in front of them. He then moves it to each side and asks them to follow it with their eyes. After that he makes them stand on one leg, holding the other leg about six inches off the ground in front of them for 30 seconds. Finally, he makes them walk a straight line, heel to toe, for nine steps, and then turn around and walk back the same way, heel to toe, on the line. What is he testing them for? He is trying to determine if they are "UNDER THE INFLUENCE."

And isn't it interesting how the Bible contrasts being "filled with the Spirit" with drunkenness in *Ephesians 5:18*? It does so because being drunk and being filled both convey the idea of INFLUENCE and CONTROL.

To be filled with the Spirit is to be CONTROLLED BY and UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF the Spirit of God.

And so, the baptism of the Holy Ghost, and the indwelling of the Holy Ghost are automatic for the Christian, coming in the salvation package. Get Christ, and you have the Holy Spirit as well.

The FILLING of the Spirit, on the other hand is to be sought continually. Weekly, daily, hourly, every minute we need to surrender to Christ and seek to be under the Spirit's control.

Conclusion:

There are several other wonderful truths about the Holy Spirit that I want to cover in the next couple sermons in this series - there is the fruit of the Spirit (or, what we might describe as the evidence that we are indwelt by Him), and there are the gifts of the Spirit. Both topics are fascinating and will hopefully be helpful to all of us.

But let's wrap things up this morning with some application. What does this have to do with you and me? Why should we care about this? Well, allow me to suggest a couple of applications:

- If the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, are both descriptive of phenomena that occur to ALL CHRISTIANS, then you and I who are saved, are indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God. And so I ask you this morning... are you indwelt by the Spirit of God? Because if you're not, then you're not a child of God, and you are in real danger.

Do you want to experience the baptism of the Spirit of God, or the indwelling of the Spirit of God? THEN TRUST CHRIST - COME TO CHRIST - BELIEVE ON THE LORD JESUS CHRIST AND BE SAVED, for it is a package deal.

- If the fullness of the Holy Spirit is something we need to surrender to daily, then I ask you... are you daily and continuously surrendering to Christ, and allowing the Holy Spirit to control you?

Imagine what your life could be like if you allowed the Holy Spirit to totally control you. Imagine what you could accomplish for God.

ILLUS - The Apostle Paul was probably such a person. And he reached the known world with the gospel in his lifetime.

ILLUS - Moody was to have a campaign in England. An elderly pastor protested, "Why do we need this 'Mr. Moody'? He's uneducated, inexperienced, etc. Who does he think he is anyway? Does he think he has a monopoly on the Holy Spirit?" A younger, wiser pastor rose and responded, "No, but the Holy Spirit has a monopoly on Mr. Moody." (Source unknown)

QUOTE (J.S. Baxter) - What God chooses, He cleanses. What God cleanses, He molds. What God molds, He fills. What God fills, He uses.

Imagine the influence our church could have in our community and our world, if we had a membership completely surrendered to and controlled by the Holy Spirit of God. Nothing would be impossible!

ILLUS - I was listening to a wonderful sermon by Dr. Stanley Toussaint of Dallas Theological Seminary. He told a tale that took place during the gas crisis of the seventies. Remember the gas lines? Remember how everybody tried to unload their big powerful cars and buy little tin cans that got better mileage? Dr. Toussaint told of a friend who wanted to sell his big Mercury Marquis, which had a 460 cubic inch engine, and nobody wanted it. Dr. Toussaint loved that big car though, and so he bought it. He couldn't afford to drive it because of the gas crisis, so he just parked it in his driveway, and went out periodically to sit in it and listen to it run. He would sit there and rev that engine until all the neighbors thought he was nuts. There he would be sitting in the driveway, with all that power available to him, and going nowhere. Dr. Toussaint pointed out how that is like so many of us. All that power available to us via the indwelling Holy Spirit, and we are not going anywhere.

Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. (John 14:17)

Chapter 39. Signed and Sealed

READ - *Nehemiah 9:38-10:39*

TEXT - *And because of all this, We make a sure covenant and write it; Our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it. (Nehemiah 9:38 NKJV)*

THEME - Because of all God has done for us, let us commit ourselves to living for Him.

Introduction:

I'm glad I had extra time this week to work on the sermon because I struggled mightily with this text, and the time has come in handy.

My struggle was due, at least in part, to the fact that I could not get my mind around one particular word. Our text this morning is *Nehemiah 9:38 - And because of all this, we make a sure covenant and write it; Our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it.* From the beginning of my study of this passage I have been convinced that "covenant" is a key word and the main topic in this passage.

But it was that word "covenant" that I have struggled with. And I have been studying what the Bible has to say about "covenant" and "covenants", and there is a lot!

Now of course "covenant" has a simple definition. It is at its core simply an agreement, a binding agreement, usually in writing.

Definition:

- 1 : a usually formal, solemn, and binding agreement : COMPACT
- 2 a : a written agreement or promise usually under seal between two or more parties especially for the performance of some action

Inc Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary., Eleventh ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

And, although I don't want to go too far with this, there are some very important covenants mentioned in the Bible.

But in spite of the fact that there is so much information in the Bible on this word covenant, I struggled with where the Lord was leading me in this particular sermon, and what was the message He wanted us to hear from *Nehemiah 10*.

Until, out of desperation, I did something I try very hard not to do when I'm preparing sermons. I read somebody else's sermon on the topic. And as I did that, I noticed that this particular individual did not use the word "covenant". He used the word "commitment". And that all of a sudden opened the floodgates of understanding in my mind and my heart as to what the Lord would have us to talk about here today.

We do absolutely no harm to our text by substituting the synonym COMMITMENT for COVENANT - *Nehemiah 9:38 - And because of all this, we make a sure COMMITMENT and write it; Our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it.*

Now think about this for a minute. If I were to stand up and preach a sermon about the importance of making a "covenant", all of us in the room this morning... well most of us anyway, would nod our heads

in agreement and "Amen" would be heard around the room, because it's a nice Bible word. But if I stand here and preach a sermon to you about commitment, things will get a lot quieter in here, because while you may struggle to understand how the word "covenant" applies to your daily lives, everyone of you knows exactly what COMMITMENT means, and some of you will really not want to hear it.

It's an interesting word, commitment. We struggle to commit in just about every area of our lives. People have a difficult time making commitments.

QUOTE - "We see it in marriages – There are people who don't want to be married because they fear commitment, or at least they fear the obligation that commitment brings. We see it in churches – people do not want to commit to things that will require anything of them. We are a world of people wanting to keep their options open all the time, so they don't commit. (Scott Kircher)

JOKE - I heard about this man who bought a parrot. It was a beautiful parrot but he had a really bad mouth. He could swear for five minutes straight without repeating himself. The man was embarrassed because the bird was driving him crazy in front of people.

He tried to appeal to the bird by asking him to clean up his language. The parrot promised to change but nothing happened. In fact, his swearing increased in both volume and frequency.

It finally got to be too much, so the guy grabbed the bird by the throat and started shaking him and yelled, "Quit it!" But this just made the parrot angry and he swore more than ever.

Then the guy got really mad and locked him in a kitchen cabinet. That really aggravated the bird and he started clawing and scratching and making all kinds of racket. When the guy finally let him out, the parrot let loose with a stream of swear words that made the man blush.

At that point, the guy was so ticked off that he threw him into the freezer. For the first few seconds the bird squawked and screamed and thrashed around. And then there was silence.

At first the guy just waited, but then he started to wonder if the bird was hurt. After a couple minutes of not hearing anything, he was so worried that he opened the freezer door. The bird calmly climbed onto the man's outstretched arm and said, "I'm really sorry about all the trouble I've been giving you. I make a solemn promise and commitment to clean up my language from now on."

The man was astounded. He couldn't believe the transformation that had come over the parrot as a result of being in the freezer for only a couple minutes. The parrot then turned to the man and said, "I just have one question... what did the chicken do?"

Too many of us are like that bird - only willing to COMMIT when we see a real benefit to doing so.

Let's spend the time that remains this morning learning about COMMITMENT - specifically about the commitment the Israelites made in *Nehemiah 10*.

The REASON they made a commitment

The people in *Nehemiah 10* were probably just like you and I, and they probably shied away from commitment just like many of us do. They, too, probably required a good reason before they were willing to commit to something.

But, they had such a reason. They had learned it from their protracted study of God's Word.

And BECAUSE OF ALL THIS, we make a sure commitment... (Nehemiah 9:38)

BECAUSE OF ALL THIS - because of all that they had learned about God in their long Bible study... because of all that they had learned about themselves... about their history of rebellion against Him... about His history of mercy and grace towards them... BECAUSE OF ALL THIS...

QUOTE - "God was good to His people when His people were not good to Him. He sent them prophets to teach them and to warn them, but the nation refused to listen (2 Chron. 36:14–21). He was merciful to forgive them when they cried out for help, and He was long-suffering with them as they repeatedly rebelled against His Word. He could have destroyed the nation and started over again (see Ex. 32:10 and Num. 14:11–12), but He graciously spared them. In His mercy, God didn't give them what they deserved; and in His grace, He gave them what they didn't deserve." (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Determined* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996), 115.)

Because of all God had done for them, they were now willing to make a commitment to Him.

It's sad, isn't it, how so many of us struggle to commit to serving God. We will listen to the Word, and acknowledge that the Holy Spirit is speaking to us about things in our life, but so often we walk away without allowing it to change us... without openly and seriously COMMITTING to DO what the Word tells us to do.

QUOTE - "It's one thing to offer the Lord a passionate prayer of confession, such as we have in chapter 9, and quite something else to live an obedient life after we say "Amen." But the people in the assembly were serious about their praying and were determined, by God's grace, to make a new beginning and live to please the Lord." (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Determined* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996), 117.)

We, like them, have good reason to be willing to COMMIT to serving our God.

Jesus paid it all,
All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow.

I was once a sinner, but I came
Pardon to receive from my Lord:
This was freely given, and I found
That He always kept His word.

Without Him I could do nothing
Without Him I'd surely fail

Without Him I would be drifting
Like a ship without a sail

Without Him I would be dying
Without Him I'd be enslaved
Without Him life would be worthless
But with Jesus thank God I'm saved

Is that reason enough, brothers and sisters, to say, with the Israelites of Nehemiah's day, "Because of all this, we make a sure COMMITMENT?"

If you need another reason, consider God's promise to those who commit: *For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. (2 Chronicles 16:9 NIV)*

The PEOPLE who made the commitment

We need not spend a lot of time here. This passage makes two things very clear about WHO made the commitment:

1. It started with the leaders
2. It included everybody.

Nehemiah topped the list (*vs. 1*). It has been said that "Everything rises and falls on leadership," and we have seen that demonstrated in this man, Nehemiah, throughout our study of the book bearing his name. His name was first on the list.

When people won't commit to a thing, it is often because leaders don't take the lead in committing to that thing. There is so much disillusionment with our leaders in America today because so many of them stand for nothing... they believe in nothing... except that which, at the moment, will make the largest number of people vote for them. Their morality and belief system seems defined by poll.

Nehemiah took the lead... the priests and Levites were next in line, and the leaders of the people and heads of households were right there.

If we want a church that is committed to following and serving Jesus Christ, not just by nodding their heads and saying "Amen," but by going out from this place and PUTTING INTO PRACTICE the teachings of Jesus, then:

1. The pastor MUST stand first and lead first. (Oh how I need your prayers!)
2. The leadership team must stand with him, and have the same level of commitment. (Team, I implore you to consider the implications of this in your life! Are you COMMITTED as a leader in this place?)
3. And FATHERS... you are the heads of your families... you, too, must commit. If you want a family that follows the Lord, you must take the lead... they must first see the commitment in YOU.

For when those God has placed in LEADERSHIP positions, whether that is civil leadership, or ecclesiastical leadership, or family leadership... when LEADERS take the lead in COMMITTING, the rest will follow.

READ - *vss. 28-29*

The SPECIFICS of their commitment

Now, there is a lot of detail in this chapter concerning just WHAT they committed to. At the highest level, they committed to OBEY GOD'S WORD (vs. 29). That summary statement is broken down, though, into various specific commitments. Let's cherry pick just a few:

1. They committed to a SEPARATED life. (vs. 30)

(i.e. no intermarriage outside the faith)

This was not about racism, but about purity. In all the commandments of God to abstain from intermarriage with the heathen the emphasis was not on what they separated FROM, but rather on what they separated TO.

QUOTE - "Separation is simply total devotion to God, no matter what the cost. When a man and woman get married, they separate themselves from all other possible mates and give themselves completely to each other. It is total commitment motivated by love, and it is a balanced decision: We separate from others to the one who is to be our life's mate. The Jews separated from the peoples around them and to the Lord and His Word (Neh. 10:28; 9:2)." (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Determined* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996), 120-21.)

Let me talk to our singles for a minute. Allow me to remind you that you need the same commitment today. The Bible is clear that Christians are not to marry non-Christians.

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? (2 Corinthians 6:14 NKJV)

You know how you can avoid marrying non-Christians? Don't DATE non-Christians. You never know what's going to happen when you agree to date somebody. There is such thing as love at first sight. You might find yourself hooked on that lost person, and then you are in a mess... a mess that will follow you possibly for the rest of your life.

And don't fall for Satan's ages-old con that it's a matter of evangelism. Maybe if I date this person I'll be able to influence them for Christ and get them saved! It almost always... listen to me, single Christian, it ALMOST ALWAYS works the other way around. It ALMOST ALWAYS results in the lost half of the relationship pulling the saved half away.

Can a man take fire to his bosom, And his clothes not be burned? Can one walk on hot coals, And his feet not be seared? (Proverbs 6:27-28 NKJV)

Do not be deceived: Bad company ruins good morals. (1 Corinthians 15:33 ESV)

They COMMITTED to a SEPARATED LIFE. We need to do the same. Singles - commit to dating and marrying only within the faith. And all of us, broaden the principle and understand that we all need to commit to living a SEPARATED and HOLY life.

2. They committed to REMEMBER the SABBATH (vs. 31)

The Jews were to set aside the seventh (sabbath) day. They were to conduct no business on the sabbath. It was a day that they were to keep dedicated to God.

Yet, the Old Testament history is filled with examples of their failure to obey the simple commandment, *Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy (Exodus 20:8)*

The Old Testament prophets constantly rebuked the Jews for violating the Sabbath - Jeremiah did (*Jeremiah 17:19-27*), Amos did (*Amos 8:4-6*), and Isaiah did (*Isaiah 56:1-2; 58:13-14*).

When we get a bit further in our study of Nehemiah, we'll see that this bold and wonderful commitment to which they all agreed here, was soon forgotten. Nehemiah will once again face a battle - fighting to keep it in force, because it's not an easy commitment to keep... many things get in the way of our commitment to honoring one day in seven, don't they?

Some believe that the commandment regarding the Sabbath is no longer binding on the New Testament believer. It is taught that while 9 of the 10 commandments are repeated in the New Testament, the commandment to *remember the sabbath day* is NOT repeated, and therefore not binding.

But Jesus made it a habit to observe the Sabbath day. The apostles, in the earliest days of the infant church, met on the Sabbath day. They soon changed the TIME of that gathering from the Sabbath (seventh) day to the first day of the week (Lord's Day), no doubt because it was on that day that Christ rose from the dead. BUT THEY STILL OBSERVED ONE DAY IN SEVEN FAITHFULLY.

And Christians in 21st century American should still honor one day in seven.

Some like to blame culture for their unwillingness to set aside a day for God. I recently read an article, however, that reminded me that the pressures in our culture are not new, and that the same pressures would have been in place in Nehemiah's day. They lived in a 24x7 culture just like we do. They would have to accept the financial loss from not doing business on the Sabbath, while watching their lost neighbors reap the financial gain. For them to obey the commandment to *remember the Sabbath day* required FAITH... TRUST, that God would take care of their needs. It is the same today.

I thank God for the faithfulness of so many in this church. I think of the Egli family who almost NEVER miss church. Our brother Charlie Egli, from the time he trusted Christ a couple years ago, has almost never missed a service. Bud and Linda - same thing. And so many are so faithful in this place, and I praise God that you are committed to such.

But all of us need to COMMIT to honoring one day in seven, just as these men, women, and children did in Nehemiah's day.

3. They committed to GIVE to support the Lord's work. (vss. 32-34)

Now there is a lot of detail in their covenant about giving. They committed to give the temple tax (vss. 32-33). They committed to work together to give needed supplies (wood) for the temple service (vs. 34). They committed to give their FIRSTFRUITS (vs. 35). In other words, their best... right off the top. And they committed to give a TITHE (vs. 37), or a TENTH to God.

While the specifics of those things might differ a bit in the New Testament, the principles have not changed. Christian - you and I need to commit to GIVING.

I've mentioned this before, but it bears repeating. When I had first joined this church and started preaching and teaching here... after a few sermons were past, a nice person approached me and said something like this, "Pastor, I appreciate that you never preach about giving." I thanked the person, and went home and repented. For even though I ought not ALWAYS teach about giving, I certainly should not NEVER teach about it! For it is a vital aspect of our Christian lives. We are to GIVE... we are to be GIVERS and GIVING... of EVERYTHING.

give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you. (Luke 6:38 ESV)

ILLUS - This past Lord's Day, Beth and I had returned from our vacation in New England, but knowing we have such good people here who can minister in our absence, we decided to attend another church in the area and let the Lord minister to us a bit. We attended the House of the Lord in Akron, where Bishop Josephus Johnson pastors. I loved the service and was greatly blessed, but I especially enjoyed

the way he took the offering. "If you are visiting with us today, we don't want you to feel any pressure to give, for this offering is for the House of the Lord. But if you are a member of the House of the Lord today, FEEL PRESSURE!"

It is a matter of trust, Christian. Do you trust God with your financial well being or not? You believe He could create the universe... do you believe He can put food on your table? You trust Him with your soul and with eternity... how about with your daily bread?

I thank God for such a giving church. In spite of my failures to preach much on the joys of giving, our offerings just keep going up. God has enabled us, through your giving, to do repair and maintain this building, and implement outreach programs, and support missionaries all around the world... Hallelujah.

But we can do more, with more. And some of you need to experience the joy of seeing God work in this area. Some of you need to COMMIT to GIVING.

4. Summing it up, they committed to NOT NEGLECT THE HOUSE OF GOD (vs. 39)

It's interesting that that phrase "the house of our God" is used 9 times in this passage. Now, "the house of God" in their day had a different meaning than today. That building, the temple, was where God dwelt... it was where they met Him... where they went to offer sacrifices that they might be right with Him. Jesus did away with the need for that when He became the final sacrifice on the cross. We no longer need go to a house to offer sacrifices - He took care of that. We now just need to accept and believe in that finished sacrifice on the cross - accept that it is sufficient. And because Jesus did away with sin by His sacrifice, God no longer dwells in a building, but rather within the hearts of all who believe. Now WE... Christians... are the temple of God!

And so, even though it might be tempting to use vs. 39 to say LET'S KEEP THIS BUILDING NICE, it would be inaccurate, I think. Rather, let's understand vs. 39 to be a reminder that we need to commit to not neglect our relationship with Christ... our personal walk with God...

Conclusion:

Well, there are other details we could discuss in this passage, but I've gone long enough. You are intelligent people, and I encourage you to spend some time reading what these people committed to.

And then, perhaps, you will come to the same conclusion I did as I studied this text: I need to renew some commitments!

BECAUSE OF ALL GOD HAS DONE FOR ME, I need to renew some commitments.

BECAUSE OF THOSE WHO LOOK TO ME AS A LEADER, I need to renew some commitments.

BECAUSE THERE ARE AREAS WHERE I'M NOT TRUSTING GOD AS MUCH AS I SHOULD, I need to renew some commitments.

How about you this morning, my brother... my sister... my friend? Do you need to renew some commitments today?

And because of all this, We make a sure covenant and write it; Our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it. (Nehemiah 9:38 NKJV)

Chapter 40. Building, Battling, and Becoming - To The End

READ - *Nehemiah 13:1-31*

TEXT -

THEME - Building, battling, and becoming are lifelong efforts, not to end until God calls us home.

Introduction:

After spending 13 weeks in the book of Nehemiah, we come finally, today, to the conclusion.

As Solomon said in the closing thoughts of *Ecclesiastes*, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter." (*Ecclesiastes 12:13*)

Now, those who have been following along faithfully are probably saying, "Hey, wait a minute, we were in *chapter 10* last week, so what happened to *chapter 11* and *chapter 12*? Good question.

I think we'll skip past *chapter 11* because it is primarily a long list of names of those who chose to move into the newly rebuilt city of Jerusalem. It chronicles some of the "urban renewal" initiatives that took place once the city was once again habitable. Remember, that before the walls were rebuilt under Nehemiah's leadership, there was too much rubble lying about the city for a horse to pass (cf. *Nehemiah 2:14*), so it's unlikely that many people were living there. Now that the city was livable again, some had to move back there. According to *Nehemiah 11:1*, they cast lots, and 10% of the people moved into the city limits, from the suburbs and outlying areas where they had been living.

But I'll let you read and reflect on that chapter on your own.

And I think we'll skip *chapter 12*, too, as we preached from it not too very long ago. This chapter contains:

- A list of those Israelites who were qualified and able to serve as priests and Levites. (*vss. 12:1-26*).
- It describes what might be considered the culminating moment of all Nehemiah's efforts - the dedication of the wall around Jerusalem (*vss. 27-43*). (It was this section that we preached from recently, when we dedicated the basement and kitchen renovations. The written version of that sermon is available online, if you desire to dig deeper into *chapter 12*. (There is no audio for that sermon, as we had not started that ministry yet when it was preached.)

NOTE - I would suggest, especially, that those who take part in our music ministry might want to review those verses and see the role that music played in their worship.

- Finally, in the closing verses of *chapter 12*, we see additional details about the people and processes that were instituted to carry out the temple worship from this point forward.

So, both chapters 11 and 12 contain good stuff, and are worthy of study... but I'll leave it for your personal study, for I want us to turn our attention this morning to *chapter 13*.

And when we do so, we notice right off the bat that, at this point, a break occurs in the action. Nehemiah, who had returned to his duties under Artaxerxes in Babylon (*vs. 6*), returns to Jerusalem to find things are not as he left them.

"Nehemiah 13 concerns a time somewhat removed from the first chapters. The time indication is in verse six, where Nehemiah explains that he had returned to Babylon in the 42nd year of Artaxerxes and that what he is recounting now was 'sometime later.' It appears from this that Nehemiah had two governorships of Judah. The first, which he has described in Nehemiah 5:14, extended from the 20th to the 32nd year of Artaxerxes. That is, it lasted for 12 years, from 445 BC to 433 BC. Some commentators consider it unlikely that Nehemiah spent all 12 of those years in Judah, judging that he must've returned to Babylon shortly after the victories of his first great year and perhaps only returned intermittently during the 12 year period. But Nehemiah does not say this. On the contrary, the gap in which the problems of chapter 13 developed seems to have been between the end of his first 12 year assignment and the second assignment years later.

How many years was this? There is no way of knowing, since Nehemiah is vague. Presumably a considerable period of time elapsed, since the problems of the final chapters are major ones and would not have happened overnight. Guesses for the year of Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem run from 425 BC to 420 BC, dates near the end of the reign of King Artaxerxes.

The significant thing is that Nehemiah was now considerably older. He must've been at least 40 when he left Susa for Jerusalem the first time. The end of his first governorship would have brought him to the age of 52, and if we are now in the years 425 to 420 BC, Nehemiah must've been near 65."

(Boice, James Montgomery, *Nehemiah - An Expository Commentary*, p. 135)

So old man Nehemiah comes back to Jerusalem. What did he discover upon his return? And what can we apply to our lives here? Let's divide our study into just those two thoughts this morning.

What happened during Nehemiah's absence from Jerusalem?

Well, the simplest answer to that question is, "Things went to pieces... fell apart... blew up. For example:

1. Tobiah was still / again causing problems. (*vss. 4-9*).

Now it's been a while since we heard about this creep, but he was much in the storyline in the early chapters. Tobiah and his cohort Sanballat were influential members of society... power brokers of some sort who initially fought Nehemiah's efforts to restore the walls and the city, even to the point of threatening physical violence and harm. If you want a refresher on Tobiah, you can go back and read the first half of the book.

It seemed that in the chapters where we were reading of the great revival... the great return to the book of the law... the wonderful covenant that God's people made with God and with each other... well, it seemed that Tobiah was no longer a factor.

Oh, but he apparently was, and his influence for evil had reached even Eliashib, the priest, and he had infiltrated right into the temple itself!

Nehemiah was a man's man. We've said it before and we see it again here. And he clearly had not mellowed in his old age. I love the way he dealt with Tobiah's infiltration. He simply threw him out in the street! No bargaining, or diplomacy, or compromise. Just, *vs. 8 - And it grieved me bitterly; therefore I threw all the household goods of Tobiah out of the room.*

2. The Levites were not being provided for. (*vss. 10-14*)

The people had promised to provide for the needs of those who filled these roles - that was part of the covenant they signed in *chapter 10*. Now those who were supposed to be dedicated to the full time service of God and the Temple had to go back to work in the fields to feed their families.

It's interesting, the question that Nehemiah asked when seeing this situation. cf. *vs. 11* - "*Why is the house of God forsaken?*" Remember the summary promise in their covenant? "We will not neglect the house of our God." (*Nehemiah 10:39*)

Again, Nehemiah wasted no time in reinstated collections to provide for the temple worship, and he appointed faithful men to oversee these things. (cf. *vss. 12-14*)

3. All the promises they had made about the Sabbath, had gone by the wayside. (*vss. 15-22*)

Remember their solemn promise? (cf. *Nehemiah 10:31*)

Nehemiah, in typical Nehemiah fashion, dealt with this issue, by 1.) Confronting those in sin (*vss. 17-18*), 2.) Removing the opportunities to violate the sabbath by closing the gates and removing the merchants (*vs. 19*), 3.) Removing, by force if necessary, those who would tempt God's people in this matter (*vss. 20-22*). I love Nehemiah's words, "Beat it, or I will lay hands on you!" (*vs. 21*)

4. The promise to avoid intermarriage was, as the other commitments in the covenant, abandoned. (cf. *vss. 22-30*) Such intermarriage was taking place, and Nehemiah had to contend against it, and institute correction where it had already taken place.

It had even reached to the family of the priest! (*vss. 28-29*) who had intermarried with the family of Sanballat the sidekick of Tobiah.

The simple fact is, that when Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, he found that every single promise... every single commitment made by the people in chapter 10, had been broken and abandoned.

What applications can we make to life in our Jerusalem?

Now, at first glance, this could be depressing... distressing... even downright disgusting. After all the reforms... all the building... all the battling... after the revival and commitment... after all was said and done, these people seemingly drifted back to right where they started! Everyone of the promises they made to God... every single commitment, had been abandoned and forgotten!

Nehemiah could have come back, seen that such devastating breaches had occurred, thrown up his hands, mounted his horse, and road back to Artaxerxes. He could have considered these regressions signs of failure and thrown in the towel. But he did not. He persisted... he didn't give up... he reinstated what had been forgotten... he reminded... he fixed... he corrected... he rebuilt... he kept on keeping on... he even singlehandedly threatened the enemies of the work with a good smack down if they didn't scam! I love this guy! I can't wait to get to heaven and shake his hand! What a man!

Are there applications to us here at FBC? Of course... there are always applications, and this passage is no different. Notice just a few, and I'll quit:

1. The building never stops.

The wall was completed in 59 days, but the BUILDING never stops!

The need for us to actively participate in serving God does not end on this earth, unless God providentially ends it.

ILLUS - I've often mentioned a childhood remembrance from this church, when during a particularly contentious board meeting (those were common back in the days when we had such meetings), a member suggested that a former member be reappointed chairman of the board (we don't have that office anymore, either, as it's not to be found in any Bible I've ever read). That former chairman's wife leaped to her feet and said, "No, he has done his part."

I've always remembered that incident, which probably seems a silly illustration to you now, as an illustration of people who think that service for God is somehow just a portion of their life here. God wants me to serve him for a year or two, and then I can give that up and get back to the rest of my life. I imagine many believers saying, "I HAVE DONE MY PART, AND I'M NOT GONNA DO NO MORE!" And I imagine God saying, "But you're still breathing! And I haven't said the game is over yet."

Jesus' parable of the pounds begins with these words - *And he called his ten servants, and delivered them ten pounds, and said unto them, Occupy till I come. (Luke 19:13 KJV)* Two thoughts jump out at us from those words of our Lord - OCCUPY = SERVE, BE BUSY, and TILL I COME means, "KEEP SERVING UNTIL I COME BACK!"

God wants us walking and serving until He calls the game! In this life, we will never come to a place where we can lay our armor down. The minute we slack off... close an eyelid in sleep... well, things go downhill fast! These people were strong and accomplishing great things for God when they were BUILDING. When the building STOPPED, they began to slide backward.

2. The battling, and the need for vigilance never stops.

The enemies are ALWAYS waiting and watching for an opening.

Tobiah never left the scene... Sanballat never left the scene... the sellers of wares lodged about the walls until Nehemiah chased them off.

Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to CONTEND EARNESTLY FOR THE FAITH which was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 3 NKJV)

The battling NEVER STOPS.

Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you STAND FAST in one spirit, with one mind STRIVING TOGETHER for the faith of the gospel, (Philippians 1:27 NKJV)

The battling NEVER STOPS.

FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT OF FAITH, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. (1 Timothy 6:12 NKJV)

The battling NEVER STOPS.

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith... (1 Peter 5:8-9a NKJV)

The battling NEVER STOPS.

3. The best of us have not become all we need to be for God

The journey toward becoming a man or woman of God is lifelong. Sanctification is a process.

ILLUS - All believers should read Pilgrim's Progress, for it is such an entertaining look at the Christian walk - at the process of sanctification.

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate a the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18 NIV)

That's the process - as we keep our eyes on Christ, we become like Him everyday... with ever-increasing glory! And that process... the process of BECOMING what God wants us to be, is lifelong - it NEVER STOPS in this life.

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13-14 NKJV)

ILLUS - Tonight, our 6-10 project team will meet once again, and we will once again prayerfully consider what God wants for our church in years 6-10 - the next 5 years. From the very beginning the Lord has laid a particular verse on my heart related to this project - a verse which describes what He wants for this church, a verse from *Exodus 14:15 - And the LORD said unto Moses, Wherefore criest thou unto me? speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward:*. They had come to the end of the road... they were pinned against the Red Sea... things looked hopeless... and the answer was GO FORWARD!

Listen, brother or sister in Christ - no matter where you are in your walk with Him, you are not there yet! BECOMING the man or woman that God wants you to be is a lifelong process. Keep at it. GO FORWARD.

4. The need for prayer never stops.

When we first met Nehemiah, one of the first things we learned was that he was a man of prayer. (*Nehemiah 1:4*) Here at the end... the very last verse... the last we see of him, he is praying.... Four times in this chapter we see him praying (cf. *vss. 14, 22, 29, and 31*)

I know we talk ad nauseum about the importance of prayer here. We even maintain the old fashioned practice of gathering on Wednesday evenings to pray together. (You should participate in that, Christian.) Why do we do it? BECAUSE PRAYER WORKS! "Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees." And I imagine that Nehemiah kept Satan trembling a lot!

When was the last time you prayed, Christian? Did you do it often when you were a young Christian, but find you do it less now? Has Satan convinced you that you don't need to do it as often now? What about praying together, spouses? When was the last time you did that? How often? THE NEED FOR PRAYER NEVER STOPS.

5. Whatever you are gifted to do... whatever you are called to do... whatever God asks you to do... you have a limited amount of time in which to get it done.

"Where do you get that, preacher? I don't see that thought mentioned in this chapter." Well, I see it in *verse 32*.

The book ended... Nehemiah's influence faded from the scene... others took his place... and he passed from the scene.

What if he had said in *chapter 1*, when he heard God's call on his life - "let me think about that for a bit"... or, "I'm awfully busy, I think I'll let somebody else take care of that." He had a limited amount

of productive years, and if he hadn't done what he did when he did it, he would have had no further opportunity to do it.

READ - *Ecclesiastes 12:1-8*. We often read this verse to our young people, and encourage them to take a stand for God while they are young. That is, of course, the gist of the passage, but we seldom pay much attention to what it says about when we get older... or when we get OLD. Read those verses and you see Solomon warning that there will soon be a day when you CANNOT serve as you would want to. Your body won't work, your teeth won't chew, your eyes won't see, your ears won't hear, and the very desire for things will fade and go. There will come a time when it will be TOO LATE.

How many times have you heard the call of God and said, "Maybe tomorrow, Lord." or "I can't do that, Lord, I'm just too busy." or "Please send somebody else, Lord, I just don't want to do that." (If we're honest with ourselves, that last one is usually the reason we give.) May we learn from the fact that there is no *Nehemiah 13:32*, that our time is short... our opportunity to serve is limited... and if we're going to do anything for God, we need to do it before the chapter ends.

"I'll answer God's call, preacher, but I've got some things to take care of... I'll answer tomorrow." No you won't, for tomorrow will be too late. The story of Nehemiah comes to an end with the stamp of "DONE"... "ACCOMPLISHED"... "FINISHED" across it. What about your story?

Conclusion:

Friendship Bible Church, we have spent thirteen weeks in the book of *Nehemiah*. I hope, that from all we've learned, we can say this is the sum:

The Christian walk is one of BUILDING, and BATTLING, and BECOMING what God wants us to be.

And I hope even more that we will take it as a challenge to:

KEEP BUILDING, and KEEP BATTLING, and KEEP BECOMING what God wants us to be, until God closes the book of our lives and calls us home.

Invitation:

With heads bowed:

There is one final application I'll make and ask you to consider. Everything we have learned from the book of Nehemiah reminds us of what Jesus Christ has done for each and every one in this room.

- It was Jesus who saw your life in rubble and ruins and decided to do something about it.
- It was Jesus who saw that you could not rebuild the walls of your life yourself, and so took upon Himself the task.
- It is Jesus who fought the ultimate battle for your soul on the cross, so that you could be saved... so that you could have eternal life...
- It is Jesus who works unceasingly from heaven to help you become the person He longs for you to be.

DO YOU KNOW HIM TODAY? PLEASE DON'T TURN HIM AWAY!

Just a second more, with heads bowed:

There may be some here today who see themselves in this last chapter... who have made promises to God in the past... commitments to Him... and now they look back across a panorama of broken commitments

Building, Battling, and
Becoming - To The End

and unkept promises. If that is you, today, you need to be as decisive in dealing with that as Nehemiah was. Cut it out of your life like a cancer. Deal it a death blow. Throw the Tobiah's out in the street, and lay hands if need be on the temptations and sins that hold you back. RECOMMIT... REDEDICATE... if necessary.

In addition to those specific invitations this morning, I would remind that our invitation period is also a time for those who are in need of baptism to step out and let that be known... or those who are interested in church membership to step out and let that be known... or for those who simply need / want prayer to step out and pray. We have brothers and sisters here who will pray with you... I will pray with you...

Just come...

Chapter 41. Oh That Men Would Thank!

READ - *Psalms 107*

TEXT - *Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, And for His wonderful works to the children of men! (Psalms 107:8 NKJV)*

THEME - For so many reasons... so many deliverances... we ought to thank God.

Introduction:

What a wonderful psalm of thanksgiving! From the very first verse to the last, it reminds of how much we have to be thankful for.

We could spend the entire morning on vs. 1 - *Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good!* Is there really a need for any other reason? We serve a good God. Let us be thankful.

ILLUS - Children pray it all around the world - "God is great, God is good..." It's the only reason we NEED to be thankful. But sometimes we forget how good our God is, and need a little reminder. *Psalms 107* gives us just such a reminder.

Scholars tell us that the author of this psalm is unknown. It was probably written during the post-exilic period, and thus fits in well with the series on *Nehemiah* that just concluded. Sometime after the Lord had *gathered (His redeemed people) out of the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south (vs. 2-3)*, this psalm was written. It is possible that those verses refer to the exodus from Egypt, but the evidence seems to favor the return from Babylon after the exile.

The psalmist gives four great examples of God's deliverance. Four times he describes the terrible state in which they found themselves. Four times he tells how, in their great need, they cried out to God for deliverance. (READ - vs. 6,13,19,28) and four times he reminds the reader that thanksgiving is the only response to such deliverance. (READ - vs. 8,15,21,31)

Notice with me the 4 different examples of God's deliverance. They are all present in my life. I have much to be thankful for. Notice how God delivered me... delivered US... from desert, darkness, disease and disaster. (BTW - I can't take credit for the alliterated outline, as I borrowed it from another preacher. I'm not clever enough to come up with something like that on my own.)

Deliverance from Desert

cf. vs. 4-9

They wandered in the wilderness... (vs. 4). They cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and He delivered them out of their distresses. (vs. 6). And He led them forth... that they might go to a city... (vs. 7)

Obviously, this speaks of what God had done for the children of Israel... both in the Exodus, and in the return from exile. But oh, how it applies to you and me!

Before I met Jesus, I was wandering in the desert. I was lost. I had no city in which to dwell. I was hungry and thirsty, and my soul fainted in me. These descriptions all describe the lost soul, don't they?

I thirsted in the barren land of sin and shame
And nothing satisfying there I found

But to the blessed cross of Christ one day I came
Where springs of living water did abound

Does that not describe you? Does it not describe me?

How can we help but thank Him for *leading us forth* (vs. 7)? *For delivering us from the desert of our lost state?*

The deliverance came as a result of (vs. 6) - the same remedy that sufficed for me! *This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles. (Psalm 34:6)*. I called upon the name of the Lord and was saved from my wandering... saved from my desert... saved from my distress. He *satisfied my longing soul, and filled my hungry soul with goodness.* (vs. 9)

Is this your testimony this morning? If so, do we not have great reason to praise Him... and to THANK HIM?

Thank You, Lord, for saving my soul.
Thank You, Lord, for making me whole.
Thank You, Lord, for giving to me,
Thy great salvation so rich and free.

Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, And for His wonderful works to the children of men! (Psalm 107:8 NKJV)

Deliverance from Darkness

cf. vss. 10-16

They *sat in darkness, bound in affliction and irons* (vs 10)... *they fell down down, and there was none to help* (vs. 12). *Until they cried out of the LORD in their trouble, and He saved them...* (vs. 13) *He brought them out... broke their chains... cut the bars of iron in two.* (vss. 14,16)

Now, this section could certainly be describing the same deliverance as the last - our salvation... our deliverance from hell to heaven... from being lost to being saved. Certainly, the condition of the lost is a dark one, and hopeless imprisonment is a valid picture of it.

One of the greatest hymns ever written described it so:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray—
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

(And Can It Be, by Charles Wesley)

And Scripture certainly describes the lost condition as DARKNESS:

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; (1 Peter 2:9 NKJV)

So, the deliverance from darkness and the deliverance from desert may describe the same deliverance - that of our soul from hell! And again, how do we not thank Him for saving us from darkness? From the prison of eternal hell? How do we not say thanks for this unspeakable gift?

But it's interesting to note, isn't it, the reason the psalmist lists for this imprisonment. (READ - vs. 11-12). They were imprisoned BECAUSE OF THEIR REBELLION.

The picture thus seems to be NOT of the salvation of an imprisoned lost soul, but of the restoration of one who has been imprisoned for his own rebellion against God. The exile, which seems to provide the historical backdrop from this psalm, was not a picture of being lost, but of being backslidden - rebelling against the God they knew... refusing to obey, or listen to His Word.

So, I suggest, that the deliverance from DESERT pictures the deliverance and salvation of a lost soul, while the deliverance from DARKNESS pictures the deliverance of a saved, but backslidden soul, from the darkness and bondage that such a condition always brings.

I confess that this, too, describes me. I look back over times in my Christian walk where I have known the right, and chosen the wrong... where I have heard the word of God and rebelled against its demands on me... where I have "*despised the counsel of the most High*" (vs. 11).

Perhaps you, too, can relate to that. Perhaps you find yourself in such a state of rebellion even now? If so, do as these people did... do as I did... do as all must if they want to get back into a right relationship with their God against whom they've rebelled - (READ - vs. 13)

As I think back over dark periods in my Christian life, I cannot help but thank the Lord for His deliverance. No part of my Christian experience makes me feel less worthy of His amazing love than the times that I, a believer, indwelt by the Spirit of God, knowing what He did to save my soul, rebelled and turned away for a while. Shame. And yet, "*He brought me out of darkness and the shadow of death, and broke my chains in pieces.*" (vs. 14) **GLORY! HALLELUJAH!**

READ - vs. 15

Deliverance from Disease

cf. vss. 17-22

Fools, because of their sin were sick (vs. 17)... they lost their appetite... death seemed imminent (vs. 18). They they cried out to LORD... He saved them... (vs. 19) He healed and delivered them... (vs. 20)

That word "afflicted" in vs. 17 seems to refer to sickness, and disease. The Message (a paraphrase of the Bible compiled by Eugene Peterson, renders vss. 17-18 as *Some of you were sick because you'd lived a bad life, your bodies feeling the effects of your sin; You couldn't stand the sight of food, so miserable you thought you'd be better off dead.*

The darkness from which we were delivered (previous point) was caused by rebelling against God's Word (vs. 11), but the "disease" spoken of in this section is caused by plain old stupid sin. **FOOLS, because of their SIN** (vs. 17)

You know, it is entirely possible to be in a state of ill health because of sin.

... if you despise My statutes, or if your soul abhors My judgments, so that you do not perform all My commandments, but break My covenant, 16 I also will do this to you: I will even appoint terror over you,

wasting disease and fever which shall consume the eyes and cause sorrow of heart. (Leviticus 26:15–16 NKJV)

For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. 30 For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. (1 Corinthians 11:29–30 NKJV)

I don't want to dive too deeply into this topic today, other than to make the simple point that it is entirely possible to be in a state of ill health because of sin.

The sickness may not be physical. It may be mental. It may be emotional. Whatever way it comes, there are times when our foolish sin against God affects us, and we are miserable because of it. I've been there. Have you? Are you there now?

What's the answer? READ - vs. 19

And should we not give thanks that God will deliverance us and save us and restore us and heal us, even when our condition is a result of our own foolishness and stupidity!

READ - vs. 21!

Deliverance from Disaster

cf. vss. 23-32

You know, I've read Psalms for many years now. I was sharing with a brother yesterday some of the methods I've used for reading the Bible down through the years. He was looking for a Bible reading plan that would allow him to read through the Old Testament once in a year, and the New Testament twice in the year. I have basically accomplished that many times by simply reading 3 chapters from the Old Testament and 2 from the New every day - if you do the math it roughly works out to once through the Old and twice through the New in a year. I have augmented that at times by reading a chapter from Proverbs daily (31 chapters - one per day), as well as 5 Psalms dailys (there are 150 of them, and 30 days in the average month, so you can figure which 5 go with each day). I am not doing that right now, but have done it for years, and so I've read *Psalms 107* many many times through the years.

And every time, I've come up short looking at this section - vss. 23-32. It seems out of place. The other three "deliverances" - from desert, and from darkness and from disease, all seem to have an explanation in the historical facts of the Israelites. All three could be describing actual events they had experienced. Then comes this one - an illustration about sailors at sea.

Now it's certainly true that sailors at sea see disaster and experience the deliverance of God. But it's not a universal situation like the three. And so I've often wondered about it.

But I now think that what the psalmist was doing here was illustrating. I think what he was saying was, there are people in this world who absolutely and positively KNOW how God delivers. If you haven't experienced the deliverance of our great God yet, ask someone who has. They'll tell you about it. Ask a sailor, for *They SEE the works of the LORD, and His wonders in the deep. (vs. 24)*

You know, there are things that happen to us in this world that we simply can do nothing about... things over which we exercise ZERO control... things that force us to either give up or trust God.

ILLUS - I just finished a historical novel about the destruction of the ancient city of Pompeii. If you recall your history, then you'll remember that in 79 AD, Mount Vesuvius, a volcano just north of Pompeii, spectacularly erupted, and completely buried the city of Pompeii. Many perished horribly. I have been fascinated by Pompeii since reading that novel, and have been researching it and learning about it. Did

you know that the eruption was of such force that it completely blocked the sun during the height of the afternoon? That the people of Pompeii would have been plunged into nighttime darkness at midday? Did you know that for hours the skies rained rock and pumice on their heads? That so much rock fell from the sky like rain that roofs collapsed and people were struck dead in the streets trying to run for shelter? Did you know that when the 1500 degree superheated pyroclastic blast came hurtling down the side of the volcano at 150 MPH and enveloped what remained of the city, that people were killed instantly, their bodies turned instantly to charcoal?

What must have gone through the minds of people as they watched this? As they witnessed the unbelievable phenomenon of the skies raining rocks for hours, burying their homes and loved ones, what must they have thought?

There was simply nothing any of them could do. It was a hopeless situation, from the human perspective. If that volcano were to erupt today, people would be just as helpless, and just as incapable of doing anything about it.

There are things that happen to us in this world over which we have ZERO control... there are times such as that where we come to know without shadow of doubt that we either cry out to God, or there is no hope, for there is nothing else we can do.

Some of you might be able to relate... you might feel like the sailors in our psalm - soul melting because of trouble (vs. 26) - at your wits' end! (vs. 27)

But what is hopeless to the human mind is not to God's! He can, and does, still deliver! READ - vs. 28

And our response ought to be - READ - vs. 31.

Conclusion:

Oh let us give thanks this Thanksgiving... not for football, or turkey, or dressing, or even for family and friends and jobs and health.

Well, it's ok to give thanks for those things, but let us remember the more important thing for which we give thanks - let us give thanks for what makes all those other things possible:

Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever. (vs. 1)

It is our God who *satisfies the longing soul* and *Who brought us out of darkness and the shadow of death, and broke our chains in pieces (vs. 14)*. It is God *Who has broken the gates of bronze, and cut the bars of iron in two (vs. 16)*. It is God, *Who sent His word and healed us, and delivered us from destruction (vs. 20)*, and it is God, *Who calms the storms of our lives, and guides us home. (vss. 29-30)*.

The Psalmist concludes - *Whoever is wise will observe these things, and they will understand the lovingkindness of the LORD. (vs. 43)*

Or, as Eugene Peterson puts that verse, *If you are really wise, you'll think this over - it's time you appreciated GOD's deep love. (Psalm 107:43 The Message)*

Yes it is... HIGH TIME we gave thanks.

One last time, READ IT WITH ME - vs. 8

Chapter 42. Digging Deeper - Pneumatology (2)

READ - *Galatians 5:16-25*

TEXT - *If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. (Galatians 5:25)*

THEME - If we have the Holy Spirit within, He will show up without! We will bear the fruit of the Spirit.

Introduction:

Continuing in our series on Digging Deeper into our Statement of Faith, you'll remember that we left off with a discussion about what our statement of faith has to say about the Holy Spirit.

Last time we learned two key truths about the Holy Spirit - He exists, and He indwells every believer. We spent a fair amount of time deciphering the differences between 3 terms that are tossed around about the Holy Spirit, oftenly incorrectly, and therefore bring confusion - the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and the filling of the Holy Spirit. If you missed that study, I encourage you to get it and listen to it, for that foundation is necessary if you're going to understand what we teach today and next time.

By way of a very quick review, though, remember that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is an historical event that took place at Pentecost when God poured out His Spirit on the church. Individual Christians today take part in that baptism into the Spirit when they become part of the church, or when they are born again. It is not a separate thing a Christian should pray for, for if you are a Christian, you have already participated in it. The indwelling of the Spirit refers to the amazing, wonderful, mind-bending truth that the Holy Spirit actually lives within the heart of individual Christians. Our text in the previous study was *John 14:17 - Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.* The indwelling of the Spirit is not something a believer should pray for, either, as it is part of the deal when you trust Christ. You've already got the Spirit within if you're a believer! Finally, we learned about the filling of the Holy Spirit, which IS something we need to seek and pray for daily, for the filling of the Spirit refers to our level of surrender to the Spirit's control in our lives.

Now there are two more important truths about the Holy Spirit which I'd like to think through before we stop digging (neither of which is adequately covered in our statement of faith, but probably should be). Next time, we'll learn some of the ramifications of the Holy Spirit's presence and work in the church, as we consider the GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT. But today, let's learn some of the ramifications of the Holy Spirit's presence and work in our individual lives. Toward that end we're going to learn about the FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT from our text in *Galatians*.

The works of the flesh

Paul begins this section with bad news.

1. In our natural state, we are a mess!

For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. (Galatians 5:17 NKJV)

The natural man is inherently evil and prone to sin. Now I know this flies in the face of what the world teaches. The philosophy of the world is that all are good, and it is only because of our environment

that bad things become part of our lives. According to the world's view, if a person is simply given a utopian environment, they will be good, and won't have any evil tendencies.

Of course, that's bunk. ILLUS - Toddlers don't need to be taught to be selfish. Don't believe me? Put two toddlers in a playpen and throw in just one toy. What happens? Who taught them that?

2. Our natural state leads to certain things, referred to by Paul as *the works of the flesh*. (vs. 19)

Briefly, let's consider these things. I don't want to be tedious, but I do want us all to see what these things are. Most if not all of them are laughed off, and glorified in our world today, but our text sternly warns us away from them, and so it behooves us to understand them.

For sake of order, we'll combine the first four which are SEXUAL SINS:

- *Adultery* (vs. 19)

Married people engaging in sexual relationships outside of their own marriage.

- *fornication* (vs. 19)

DEFINITION - Greek PORNEIA, from which comes our word PORNOGRAPHY. This word describes any and all illicit sexual activity. It is a broad word, encompassing things like sex before marriage, homosexuality, pornography... basically any sexual activity outside of God's design for sex, which is a man and a woman within the relationship of marriage.

- *uncleanness* (vs. 19)

Impurity, either physically or morally. This seems to be even a more broad word than fornication.

- *lewdness (lasciviousness - KJV)* (vs. 19)

A word that means unrestrained living, licentiousness. This is the abandonment of one's self to immorality.

The next grouping describes WORSHIP SINS:

- *idolatry* (vs. 20)

Basically "image worship" but in a broader sense refers to putting anything ahead of God in our lives.

- *sorcery* (vs. 20)

DEFINITION - Greek PHARMAKEIA, from which we get our word pharmacy. This word implies drug use / abuse. Drugs were a part of many false worship rituals, and so that is probably the primary meaning here, but general drug abuse also falls into this.

Then there are the SINS OF DIVISION, or SOCIAL SINS:

Note

Notice how these characterize us so much of the time. So many problems in churches have their roots in these sins!

I've been thinking lately about our next series of study here at FBC. We've finished our study of *Nehemiah*, and are soon to finish our Digging Deeper series. I'm prayerfully thinking about two possibilities for where we go next - "Revelation - a Study of Last Things," or 1 Corinthians. I was reading 1 Corinthians just this morning in my devotions and noticed one

of the problems that existed in that troubled church. Paul said, *It has been reported to me that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. (1 Corinthians 1:11 NKJV)* DOESN'T THAT SOUND LIKE A LOT OF CHURCHES TODAY?

How much better to remember the words of the Psalmist - *Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! (Psalms 133:1)*

- *contentions (vs. 20)*

Strife, quarrels, contention, debates.

ILLUS - My grandmother used to say, "I don't want you around if you don't want to argue with me." There are a lot of people who think arguing... debating... pugnacious demeanor, is a good thing. But it's not. It's a work of the flesh!

- *jealousies (vs. 20)*

Rivalries; self-seeking ambition; intrigue.

- *dissensions (seditions - KJV) (vs. 20)*

Dissension, disunion, division.

- *heresies (vs. 20)*

factions

Some aren't so easily categorized:

- *hatred (vs. 20), outbursts of wrath (vs. 20)* (Temper, a flare up of temper), *envy (vs. 21), murders (vs.21)* (which Jesus pointed out is an extension of hatred).
- *drunkenness (vs.21), revelries (vs. 21)* (i.e. carousing; partying)
- *AND THE LIKE (vs. 21)*

The list is by no means exhaustive! Rather it is representative.

What a horrible list! These *works of the flesh* are what characterize all men and women before they are saved. This list describes my "natural" tendencies... YOUR "natural tendencies."

Thankfully, the text doesn't stop here... it goes on to better things:

The Fruit of the Spirit.

The word FRUIT is interesting. It describes something which naturally occurs. For example:

- Apple trees bear the fruit of APPLES. It is a natural expectation. If an apple tree does not bear fruit, what good is it?
- Tomatoe plants bear the fruit of TOMATOES.
- Orange trees bear the fruit of ORANGES.
- And Spirit filled Christians bear the fruit of the Spirit! It is a natural expectation!

The word FRUIT also indicates something that takes time. Fruit doesn't pop out immediately, but rather grows and ripens over time.

And so, because we are indwelt by the Spirit of God, those things described here as "the fruit of the Spirit" should be in us, in ever increasing amounts, ripening over time.

FIRST - The fruit of the Spirit will be evident in our relationship with God.

1. *The fruit of the Spirit is love...* (vs. 22)

DEFINITION - Greek AGAPE - godly love (as opposed to romantic love (EROS) or friendship; brotherly love (PHILEOS)). This is unconditional love. This is the love of choice.

It describes God's love to us, our love for God, and our love for each other.

ILLUS - The world knows we are Christians by our love - *By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. (John 13:35)*

ILLUS - And one of the evidences we have, personally, is our love - *We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. (1 John 3:14)*

What is it that brings us together every Lord's Day? Why do we like being around other Christians? What is the attraction that binds the hearts of believers everywhere? Why is it that when we come into contact with other believers, anywhere, and we feel an immediate kinship? It's because *the fruit of the Spirit is love.*

You don't have that? You don't like being around other believers? You need to examine your life, for *the fruit of the Spirit is love.*

2. *joy* (vs. 22)

Not based on circumstances, which may make us unhappy sometimes. Joy is based on our walk with God, and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

ILLUS - Erma Bacon - loss of leg, loss of son, never loss of joy.

Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: (1 Peter 1:8)

Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. (Habakkuk 3:17-18)

3. *peace* (vs. 22)

How glorious to have peace with God. To know that everything between Him and me is alright.

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: (Romans 5:1)

ILLUS - E.V. Hill's illustration of how he had to be guarded by his deacons from the KKK, and from the Black Panthers, and yet when he went to bed at night he slept soundly. He was awakened by those yelling that a cross was burning on his lawn, and he "turned over and snored." Peace with God.

The fruit of the Spirit will be evident in our relationship with God. Do you love God, can you say that you have the joy of God within, and do you have peace? Can you rest in the midst of the storms of life, because you know without doubt that everything is alright between you and the God of this universe?

SECOND - The fruit of the Spirit will be evident in our relationship with others.

Uh oh... now it starts getting a little more personal! We like the first three, but these three we struggle with, don't we?

1. *longsuffering* (vs. 22)

DEFINITION - Greek MAKROTHUMIA - patient endurance under injuries inflicted by others.

Love SUFFERS LONG... (1 Corinthians 13:4)

Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. (2 Timothy 4:2)

ILLUS - My struggle over "gray areas." My friend who, no matter what I said, would respond with "Well that might be true and it might not!" Hard to be longsuffering.

2. *kindness* (vs. 22)

Compare this to Paul's list of works of the flesh - notice how many this one counters - wrath, strife, variance, etc.

Christians are to be KIND people, GENTLE people.

QUOTE (Rev. Arnold) - "Always be kind."

As the world grows increasingly less kind (and it does as evidenced by the woman who pepper sprayed a rival shopper on Black Friday last week), the kindness of Christians becomes more and more of a witness.

3. *goodness* (vs. 22)

This is an ACTIVE goodness; an ENERGETIC principle.

The spirit filled Christian does not just think good thoughts and sing good songs and listen to good truths. He / she DOES GOOD WORKS.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10)

QUOTE (Twitter) - "The truth is that, though we were justified by faith alone, the faith that justifies is never alone...it always produces good works."

THIRD - The fruit of the Spirit will be INCREASINGLY evident in our personal holiness.

1. *faithfulness* (vs. 23)

The Bible says that *God is faithful (1 Corinthians 1:9, 10:13)* but it also says ... *a faithful man, who can find? (Proverbs 20:6)*

2. *gentleness (meekness, KJV)* (vs. 23)

strength under control.

ILLUS - When I see this word I always think of a friend from college who was a nationally known and accomplished organist, and who provided the organ music for our church services. He told of a time when he had performed a piece during the worship service - the piece was considered one of the most difficult organ pieces ever written, and one that only a handful of organists in the world could play well - a little old lady approached him after that service and said, "You have RUINED the music in this

church." I can still see the rage in his face as he recalled the event and told of how his first reaction was to smash her to the ground. He didn't tell her off, though, he put his arm around her and talked to her about it as a Spirit filled Christian should. They parted smiling. That's meekness - strength (he could have demolished her) under control (he did not).

3. *self-control (temperance, KJV) (vs. 23)*

the holding in of passions and appetites.

ILLUS - I have a preacher friend who had a weight problem. He tried all kinds of diets. One day he just started eating differently, and began losing weight. When asked how he was doing it, he indicated he had finally gotten hold of this verse - the fruit of the Spirit is self control!

If the Spirit indwells each of us as believers, then the implication of these verses is clear - these nine characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit should also be in us, in ever-increasing measure. The nine descriptions of the *fruit of the Spirit* are descriptions of Christ-likeness, and we should see them in ourselves, more and more with each passing day.

Conclusion:

Two applications arise in my mind. I'll mention them and we'll be done:

1. First is a warning.

Our lives as Christians should not look like the picture Paul painted here of the NATURAL, UNSPIRITUAL, UNSAVED person!

People don't like warnings, but the Bible is filled with them. And I wouldn't be much of a preacher if I didn't warn you when you are in danger.

And so, the Bible warns us here that if our life looks like the picture painted here, we need to examine our salvation. Notice what Paul says in *vs. 21, they who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God!*

That word PRACTICE is important:

- I like the way Timothy Keller put it when he said, "There is no sin that is a match for His grace." You cannot lose salvation once obtained.

The occasional fall is normal, Christian. That's why it's important to know Paul used the word "PRACTICE" here. We are sinners, even when saved, and are working out our salvation daily.

- But when this list CHARACTERIZES YOUR LIFE, it should warn you to EXAMINE YOUR LIFE.

2. The second is an encouragement.

Because the believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God, these *works of the flesh* should be diminishing in our lives, and the *fruit of the Spirit* should be increasing!

As you examine your life, do you see the fruit ripening? If so, praise the Lord! It's evidence of salvation. It's a reminder of His working in your life!

Making a rotten sinner into the image of Christ is not an overnight thing though - it takes a lifetime. And progress may seem slow sometimes. That's why Paul says in *vs. 25 - If (i.e. SINCE) we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.* We don't start bearing ripe fruit the minute we trust Christ. We arrive at that destination by WALKING... and walking is a slow process.

QUOTE (J.R.R. Tolkien) - "Little by little, one travels far."

And little by little... day by day... the indwelling Holy Spirit of God works in your life, pushing out the works of the flesh, and bearing the fruit of the Spirit.

Chapter 43. Digging Deeper - Pneumatology (3)

READ - *Ephesians 4:1-16*

TEXT - *from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:16 NKJV)*

THEME - You have a gift, and the body of Christ needs you to use it!

Introduction:

For some weeks now, we've been digging deeper into our statement of faith. I won't read that statement for you again this morning, but I encourage you to know it and be familiar with it. It, like most other important information pertaining to Friendship Bible Church can be found by visiting our church web sites.

Well, we've been talking about where we stand on the Holy Spirit... we're digging deeper into pneumatology, or the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and this will be our third message dealing with that topic.

In the first message, we learned that Christians are all baptized in the Holy Spirit, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, as a result of salvation. We also learned that we are to daily... constantly... seek the filling of the Holy Spirit, which is a term describing our surrender to His control in our lives... our "being under His influence" in our daily lives.

Last week, in the second message, we learned what it means to us as individual Christians, that we are indwelt by the Spirit of God - we are no longer enslaved to the works of our flesh, but now see the Holy Spirit working in us to bear the fruit of the Spirit, in ever increasing measure, making us more like Christ day by day.

Today, in this third message, let's consider what it means to us as a church that we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. And where last week we learned that the benefit to us as individual believers is that we now have the FRUIT of the Spirit in our lives, today we'll see that the benefit to us as a church is that we now have the GIFTS of the Spirit in our midst.

I want you to use your imagination for a minute this morning:

Imagine, if you would, a symphony orchestra (paint picture of how each part of required. No instrument is unimportant and no instrument, no matter how flashy, is more important. TOGETHER, they make the music.

Imagine, if you would, a building. Paul uses such an image to describe the church. There are certain parts in a house that are less glamorous than others, but I submit that there are not parts that are less important than others. (ILLUS - I recall one time I was trenching in my back yard so I could run a power line to my barn. I hit the sewer line running from my house to the septic system. Ordinarily, this particular aspect of my house would seem unimportant and rightly remain unseen, but suddenly it's importance was clear!)

Imagine, if you would, the human body - a marvel of creation (note I didn't say evolution). Some parts of the body are definitely less glamorous than others - but none are less important.

A symphony only works when each instrument plays its part. A building only stands strong when each part is in its place. And the human body only remains healthy and fit when each member of that body is healthy and fit and functioning.

All of these illustrate what the Bible teaches about spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are given to every Christian to equip the body of Christ, and to help that body grow into maturity in Christ. And that only happens when each part does its work.

Now, we won't be able to deal with all aspects of our subject this morning. We'll have to pick and choose. But I'd like to mention a few general truths about spiritual gifts, and then focus in on one vitally important, key truth.

Some general truths

1. There are several passages (four main ones) that discuss spiritual gifts: *Romans 12:3-8*; *1 Corinthians 12*; *Ephesians 4:1-16*; *1 Peter 4:10-11*.

In *Romans 12* and *1 Peter 4*, the emphasis seems to be on USING the gift(s) you have been given. *Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, LET US USE THEM: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; 7 or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; 8 he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:6-8 NKJV) EACH OF YOU SHOULD USE WHATEVER GIFT YOU HAVE RECEIVED to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. 11 If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:10-11 NIV)*

In *1 Corinthians 12*, the emphasis seems to be on REGULATING the gift(s) you have been given.

Note

(The Corinthian church believed in spiritual gifts, and was commended by Paul for their use of and emphasis on giftedness, cf. *1 Corinthians 1:7*) HOWEVER, they were truly messed up in their understanding, and the majority of teaching in the book related to the subject of gifts is CORRECTIVE in nature. They were going off the deep end in their understanding of the topic, and Paul had to yank their chain. We need to be careful with developing too much of our understanding about spiritual gifts from this passage, without comparing it diligently to the other passages which speak to the subject.)

In *Ephesians 4*, the emphasis seems to be on EXPLAINING THE REASON for the gift(s) you have been given.

There is overlap in these passages - each dealing with most of the aspects of spiritual gifts, but each seeming to emphasize a major point, as described.

2. In addition to understanding where in our Bible we find the topic of spiritual gifts, it would be helpful to have a working definition of spiritual gifts, would it not?

What are spiritual gifts?

Was Mozart's amazing musical ability a spiritual gift? Is Donald Trump's ability to make money a spiritual gift?

ILLUS - I know a man who is a great musician. Somebody once commented to him about how thankful he must be to have such a spiritual gift. He pointed out that it was not a spiritual gift, but rather something he had learned from childhood and honed with countless hours and days and weeks and years of practice and labor. This man is a believer, and believes in spiritual gifts, but he also understood that not everything a person can do fits the definition of a spiritual gift.

There is a difference between natural abilities or talents, learned behaviors, and spiritual gifts. All of course, ultimately, have their source in God, but there is a distinct difference about spiritual gifts which needs to be defined. I like this definition:

DEFINITION - A spiritual gift is an ability that is spiritual in character, given by the Holy Ghost to a believer (but only to believers), for the purpose of building up other believers in the local church.

The passages we are studying list several examples (not exhaustive). I'll mention them and move on, allowing you to study the individual gifts on your own. (You should familiarize yourselves with these lists, though, as they are helpful in determining your own gift(s).

In *Romans* we find prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, and showing mercy.

In *1 Corinthians* we find wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues, interpretation of tongues.

In *Ephesians* (where the emphasis is on gifted men rather than the gifts themselves), we have apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.

In *1 Peter* we have speaking and ministering.

3. Now, with that definition in mind, and based on what we learn from these four main passages (i.e. *Romans 12*, *1 Corinthians 12*, *Ephesians 4*, and *1 Peter 4*), we come to some of those general truths, I mentioned. Here they are:

- a. Spiritual gifts are given to EVERY CHRISTIAN.

But the manifestation of the Spirit is given TO EACH ONE for the profit of all: (1 Corinthians 12:7 NKJV) (Or, as the NLT puts it - A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other.)

But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing TO EACH ONE individually as He wills. (1 Corinthians 12:11 NKJV)

But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. (Ephesians 4:7 NKJV) (And again, the NLT clarifies it for us - However, he has given each one of us a special gift through the generosity of Christ.)

As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another... (1 Peter 4:10 NKJV)

It's interesting that this key fact - spiritual gifts are given to EVERY CHRISTIAN - seems to be mentioned in all four of the primary texts that discuss spiritual gifts. *1 Corinthians 12*, *Ephesians 4*, and *1 Peter 4* all mention it. So, too, does *Romans 4* - *God has dealt TO EACH ONE a measure of faith. (NKJV)*

Now I hope, brothers and sisters, that you are getting the import of this. ALL believers have a spiritual gift or gifts. ALL. If I'm not making that personal enough for you, let me state it like this. YOU have a spiritual gift or gifts! YOU! You might not have figured it all out yet, and you might not be able to say with any certainty how you are gifted, but if you are a child of God, then YOU have been gifted. No exceptions.

- b. Spiritual gifts are to benefit OTHERS, not just you.

But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all (or, "for the common good" (ESV) (1 Corinthians 12:7 NKJV)

This is the major emphasis in *1 Corinthians 12*, where the Christians were seeking only the flashy gifts, and seemed to want to show off their superior giftedness! Exactly the wrong understanding of gifts. As with everything else in Christianity, it's not about YOU, it's about OTHERS. Any time self enters the equation, you can bet you're on the wrong track.

c. Spiritual gifts are to be USED.

(Christ is displeased when we are bad stewards of what He has entrusted to us.)

True of money, talents, time, the gospel... we are stewards of all these things. And we are stewards of the gifts God has entrusted to us.

As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. (1 Peter 4:10 NKJV)

ILLUS - Parables of the talents / pounds.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. (James 1:22 NKJV)

QUOTE (George Whitefield, from his journals) "Nothing has done more harm to the Christian Church than thinking the examples recorded in Holy Scripture were written only to be read and not imitated by us."

So... you HAVE BEEN GIFTED, it is FOR THE BENEFIT OF YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN THE CHURCH, and it is has been ENTRUSTED TO YOU so that you would USE IT.

Let's move now from the general to the specific:

A key truth

Let's consider the *Ephesians 4* passage. I believe there is a key truth here that helps us understand why we have spiritual gifts, why we need spiritual gifts, and why the 21st century church is sometimes so messed up. Consider:

1. UNITY is a major goal of the church. (*vss. 1-6, esp. vs. 3*)

Not just human consensus, by the way, but all of us agreeing with God - having the mind of Christ, consensus with Christ. (And that means agreement with His Word.)

Most Christians would agree this is a desirable goal.

Most Christians would also admit we don't often reach this goal.

2. GIFTS are a means of reaching the goal. (*vss. 7-13, esp. vs. 13*)

We learned earlier that the Holy Spirit gives gifts to every believer. (*cf. 1 Corinthians 12*)

Here we see a slightly different emphasis, for we see that Christ gives GIFTED BELIEVERS to the church (*vs. 11*)

The gifts, and gifted believers, are given SO THAT:

a. God's people will be prepared for service. (*vs. 12*)

b. The body of Christ (church) will be built up. (*vs. 12*)

c. We will reach unity in faith and knowledge. (vs. 13)

d. We will reach maturity and Christlikeness. (vss. 13-14)

3. But all this good stuff doesn't happen on it's own - EACH PART MUST DO ITS WORK. cf. vs. 16

From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:16 NIV)

(A couple of other translations clarify this even further:

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. (Ephesians 4:16 ESV)

From him the whole body grows, fitted and held together through every supporting ligament. As each one does its part, the body grows in love. (Ephesians 4:16 NET)

Now don't get me wrong - there are other ways to run churches, and there are other ways to try and do a work for God... but why in the world would we ever want to do it any way but God's way?

ILLUS - Uzzah (2 Samuel 6) - Putting the ark on a cart and dragging it behind oxen seems like a perfectly workable solution. But it was not God's way, and He didn't bless it. Uzzah reaching up to steady the ark when it shook on the cart seemed perfectly logical, but it was not God's way, and it was therefore not successful! Any time we choose a method other than God's way, we will see less success and less of God's blessing than if we'd just followed His instructions.

If we're going to grow as a church, it will be because Christians use their spiritual gifts, AS EACH PART DOES ITS WORK.

If we're going to have unity as a church, it will be because Christians use their spiritual gifts, AS EACH PART DOES ITS WORK.

If you and I are going to grow in knowledge and Christlikeness, it will be because Christians use their spiritual gifts, AS EACH PART DOES ITS WORK.

Conclusion:

I've been preaching to Christians, this morning. If you have never trusted Christ, then nothing I've said this morning applies to you... yet.

There is a gift, though, that you may receive today, a gift that is greater than any I've yet discussed - the gift of salvation.

Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift. (2 Corinthians 9:15)

The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: (Ephesians 2:8)

Have you received that gift?

ILLUS - It's like Christmas morning when you were a kid. You ran downstairs and saw this HUGE gift under the tree with your name on it. There were other gifts there, too... maybe some smaller ones stuffed in stockings hung from the mantle. But you KNEW that BIG GIFT was the most important one, and you couldn't wait to open it. The gift of salvation is the BIG GIFT. Open it first, and then you can move on to the others - the gifts of the Spirit which are poured out on Christians.

Have you received that gift... the BIG GIFT of salvation?

If you've never trusted Christ, may I entreat you to accept the gift of salvation He so freely offers you this morning. It is not yours until you accept it.

But again, I've been preaching to Christians, those who have received the gift of salvation, and who possess the gift(s) of the Spirit, whether they use them or not.

Christians, will you use the gift(s) the Spirit has entrusted to you? The church needs you. If the Lord's work is to be all that it can be here, your gifts are needed. If any one of your gifts, no matter how small, is missing, our church will be damaged.

ILLUS - I opened the message this morning by suggesting you picture a symphony orchestra. One of my favorite movies has just such music as its theme - Amadeus - the story of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. There is a line in that movie, where Antonio Salieri, a rival of Mozart's, was describing the absolute perfection of Mozart's music. Salieri said, "Displace a single note, and there would be diminishment. Displace a single phrase, and the structure would fall."

Just as it is true of music, it is true of our church... or any church... of the body of Christ. Displace a single gift... a single gifted person, and there is diminishment.

From him the whole body grows, fitted and held together through every supporting ligament. As each one does its part, the body grows in love. (Ephesians 4:16 NET)

Invitation

Two questions for you to consider this morning, while heads are bowed and eyes are closed:

1. Have you received the gift of salvation?

It's there for you, and all you need to do is ask for it. Pray, and ask for it like this: "Lord Jesus, I believe I am a sinner, and that you died on the cross to pay for my sins. I want the gift of salvation you offer, and ask for it. Save me, Lord, today.

Did anybody pray that prayer?

2. Christian, are you using the gift or gifts you received when you got saved?

Do you even know what they are?

Some, today, might need to say "Lord, I'm not using the gift you gave me. Forgive me. I'm not even sure what it is. Help me to know it, and to use it."

Did anybody pray that prayer?

In both cases, you ought to make the decision public. You ought to let your brothers and sisters here know of it. As we sing our final song this morning, will you step out? You are among friends here. We love you and want nothing but good things for you.

Let us rejoice with you if you received the gift of salvation this morning.

Let us pray with you as you seek to understand more about the spiritual gift(s) God has entrusted to you.

Chapter 44. Digging Deeper - Eschatology

READ - Mark 13:32-37

TEXT - *Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. (Mark 13:36 NKJV)*

THEME - Jesus' return is IMMEDIATE, and we must be ready for it.

Introduction:

We are in the 3rd week of Advent - a season of looking forward to the coming of the Lord. There is no doubt that Advent concerns itself with the first coming of Christ - as a baby in a manger. Certainly that is the main thought at this season, and we rejoice in thanksgiving and praise that Jesus came... that first time... in that manger... for you and for me. But that first Advent is not the end of the story. There is a second Advent. And oh, the ramifications to our lives that Jesus is coming again!

Also, we have for several weeks been working through a study where we attempt to "dig deeper" into our Friendship Bible Church statement of faith (A copy of which you can always find, along with other information related to FBC on the church website). And it has just worked out, as we have progressed in this study, that we talk this morning about eschatology - the doctrine of future things - the second Advent of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

And so, let us consider this thought from our statement of faith:

WE BELIEVE in the bodily resurrection, immortality and rapture of all believers at Christ's imminent coming and that His coming is both pretribulational and premillennial.

FACT - Jesus is coming again!

If you are going to believe that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and laid in manger, then you are going to do so because you heard it from the pages of the Bible. If you are going to believe that Jesus lived a sinless life during which he healed, and loved, and taught, and led, "went about doing good", then you are going to do so because you heard it from the pages of the Bible. If you are going to believe that Jesus laid down His life on the cross as a voluntary atoning sacrifice to pay for your sins and mine... to pay our sin debt so that we might have access to a relationship with God in heaven forever, then you are going to do so because you heard it from the pages of the Bible.

And if you believe those things, then you can't escape the fact that the same Bible which says He came, was born, lived, died for you and me, and rose again, says that He is coming again!

And the simple and plain-spoken truth is, it doesn't matter whether you believe it or not - it is a FACT - Jesus is coming again. The first Advent - FACT. The second Advent - just as much FACT.

SONG - Jessie E. Strout, in the hymn "Jesus Is Coming Again" wrote these words in 1872, and they are still true today:

Lift up the trumpet, and loud let it ring:

Jesus is coming again!
Cheer up, ye pilgrims, be joyful and sing:
Jesus is coming again!

Echo it, hilltops; proclaim it, ye plains:
Jesus is coming again!
Coming in glory, the Lamb that was slain;
Jesus is coming again!

Heavings of earth, tell the vast, wondering throng:
Jesus is coming again!
Tempests and whirlwinds, the anthem prolong;
Jesus is coming again!

Nations are angry - by this we do know
Jesus is coming again!
Knowledge increases; men run to and fro;
Jesus is coming again!

SONG - John W. Peterson said the same thing in his more modern hymn with the same title:

Marvelous message we bring;
Glorious carol we sing!
Wonderful word of the King:
Jesus is coming again!

Coming again, coming again!
Maybe morning, maybe noon,
Maybe evening and maybe soon!
Coming again, coming again!
O what a wonderful day that will be -
Jesus is coming again!

It is a FACT - One day Jesus will return. Physically... actually... to this very earth.

This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. (Acts 1:11 ESV)

It is a FACT - One day Jesus will return. Physically... actually... to this very earth.

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14:3 NKJV)

It is a FACT - One day Jesus will return. Physically... actually... to this very earth.

And the Bible doesn't stop with just telling us He's coming. It gives a lot of detail on the topic. We are not in the dark about it. We don't know everything, but we do know some things.

1. We DO KNOW that it is promised.

READ - *Mark 13:26*

and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11 ESV)

so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation. (Hebrews 9:28 NKJV)

2. We DO NOT KNOW when.

ILLUS - Harold Camping, Christian radio broadcaster with Family Life Radio, has made a name for himself from his failed attempts to predict the date of Christ's return. "His 2011 end times prediction was that on May 21, 2011 Jesus Christ would return to Earth, the righteous would fly up to heaven, and that there would follow five months of fire, brimstone and plagues on Earth, with millions of people dying each day, culminating on October 21, 2011 with the end of the world. He had previously predicted judgment days on May 21, 1988, and September 6, 1994." (Wikipedia)

READ - *Mark 13:32,35*

"Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." (Luke 12:40 NKJV)

Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. (Revelation 3:3 NKJV)

Now, Bro. Camping may have been messed up on this idea of predicting WHEN, but let's give him props for believing in the second coming. We DO KNOW IT IS A FACT, even if we DON'T KNOW WHEN it will occur.

3. We DO KNOW that it is SOON... IMMINENT, even.

In other words, it could happen at any time. Perhaps TODAY. Oh how we need to get hold of that truth. There is no prophecy of scripture yet needing fulfilment that holds back His return. It is the VERY NEXT THING in the timeline of prophecy. (Some of you are probably praying, "Now, Lord? So I don't have to endure the rest of this sermon?" It could happen!)

READ - *Mark 13:36 - "suddenly"*

You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand (i.e. NEAR). (James 5:8 NKJV)

Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. (Philippians 4:5 NKJV) (the NLT renders that last phrase as "Remember, the Lord is coming soon.")

Several times in Revelation, Jesus said "I COME QUICKLY." e.g. *Behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book. (Revelation 22:7 NKJV)*

Some might ask, "Why is it taking so long, then? What's the hold up?" Perhaps because He is waiting for you! *The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9 NKJV) OR, NLT - The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.*

And so, the Bible is clear - Jesus is coming again, and it could be at any moment. Here is the timetable:

1. Rapture - second coming in the air

READ - *1 Thessalonians 4:13-18*

2. Tribulation - great judgement on earth

Seven years of judgement on this earth, described in *Daniel 9, Revelation 11-18*.

Of this period Jesus said, *For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. (Matthew 24:21 NKJV, cf. Mark 13:19)*

3. Second coming in glory.

READ - *Revelation 19:11-16*

4. Millenium - 1000 years of peace.

Described in *Revelation 20*

It is during this period when the world will FINALLY... for the first time since Adam plunged all humanity into conflict by eating the forbidden fruit... FINALLY, we will know peace on earth, and goodwill toward men."

Then winging, singing on its way,
The world revolves from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime,
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men.

This is when we'll begin to experience what both Isaiah and Micah described - *The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, The leopard shall lie down with the young goat, The calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; Their young ones shall lie down together; And the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole, And the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD As the waters cover the sea.. (Isaiah 11:6-9 NKJV) He shall judge between the nations, And rebuke many people; They shall beat their swords into plowshares, And their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, Neither shall they learn war anymore. (Isaiah 2:4 NKJV; cf. Micah 4:3)*

This will be a time of PEACE - REAL PEACE, when the Prince of Peace will be in control.

5. New heavens and new earth - eternity with Christ.

Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. (Revelation 21:1 NKJV)

They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever. (Revelation 22:4-5 NKJV)

So, based on these truths we can say:

WE BELIEVE in the bodily resurrection, immortality and rapture of all believers at Christ's imminent coming and that His coming is both pretribulational and premillennial.

Application

I hear some of you this morning. "So what?" you are asking. "It's Christmas time, preacher, and there are things to do. Presents to wrap. Family to attend to. If Jesus is coming, He's coming, and there's nothing I can do about it. I don't see the connection to all the things I have to do today."

Some of you are a little more astute, and you already see the application. You've already heard and accepted what our text has so clearly warned us of - the SUDDEN and UNEXPECTED nature of His return. And so, we have to ask ourselves, don't we - "What will I be doing when He comes?"

- Will He find you watching and ready for His return? (cf. *Mark 13:33*)

Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. (Luke 12:37 NKJV)

- Will He find you working at the tasks He has appointed to you? (cf. *Mark 13:34*)

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 15:58 NKJV)

ILLUS - One day in 1789, the sky over Hartford darkened ominously. Some of the members of the Connecticut House of Representatives, glancing out the windows, feared the end was at hand. Quieting a clamor for immediate adjournment, Colonel Davenport, the Speaker of the House, rose and said, "The Day of Judgment is either coming or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought."

- Or will He find you busy about other things less important?

The older I get the more convicted I am of how much time I waste. I spend so much time on trivia... things that have no value in light of eternity... "wood, hay, and stubble." I don't need to make a list of those useless pursuits, do I? You are intelligent people and have the same Holy Spirit convicting you. You know just as I know when something is foolish and worthless and a waste of time that should be better used for God.

A good question to ask ourselves, often, is, "Do I want Jesus to return and catch me doing this?"

Now, I'm not saying that we should never take a break, or rest, or engage in harmless entertainments. Rather it means, when Christ returns, what will He find CHARACTERIZES YOUR LIFE?

ILLUS - Parable of the rich fool - READ - *Luke 12:16f*

- Or will He find you sleeping? (cf. *Mark 13:36*)

This refers not to physical sleep, but rather to a state of unpreparedness.

ILLUS - Boy Scout motto - BE PREPARED.

This is the key thought to our lesson today - ARE YOU PREPARED, or are you sleeping? Jesus' return is IMMINENT, and we must be ready for it.

Conclusion:

To the Christian, this is the blessed hope - nothing brings more joy than the thought that Jesus is coming again. May you be encouraged Christian by the truth that when Jesus comes, there will be:

NO MORE sickness

NO MORE pain
NO MORE sorrow
NO MORE death
NO MORE poverty
NO MORE trials and problems and struggles
NO MORE weakness
NO MORE weariness
NO MORE old age
NO MORE politics
NO MORE triumph of the wicked
NO MORE persecution of the righteous

The wrong SHALL FAIL,
The right PREVAIL

ONLY peace
ONLY good
ONLY righteousness
ONLY joy
ONLY health
ONLY wealth
ONLY JESUS
FOREVER AND EVER AND EVER

To the lost, this is cause for fear and concern. Those without Christ might be caught out! Too late!

ILLUS - I'm often reminded of an incident that occurred in college - my intro to ed class. Toward the end of the class, the instructor noticed one student, seated just about in the middle of the class, slumped over asleep at his desk. She encouraged us to let him sleep - not wake him. She spoke softly through the rest of the class, dismissed us sotto voce (quietly), and we all snuck out without waking him. I have often wondered what he thought when he woke up, for he had missed everything, and we had all left him behind.

Don't sleep through it, my friend.

Tw'as the night before Jesus came and all through the house
Not a creature was praying, not one in the house.
Their Bibles were lain on the shelf without care
In hopes that Jesus would not come there.

The children were dressing to crawl into bed,
Not once ever kneeling or bowing a head.
And Mom in her rocker with baby on her lap
Was watching the Late Show while I took a nap.

When out of the East there arose such a clatter,
I sprang to my feet to see what was the matter.
Away to the window I flew like a flash
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash!

And what was that sound that my ears seemed to hear?
A trumpet - proclaiming that Jesus was here.
With a light like the sun sending forth a bright ray

I knew in a moment this must be The Day!

The one's who'd believed in this Savior's love
He gathered to take to His Father above.
With those who were ready He rose without sound
While all the rest were left standing around.

I fell to my knees, but it was too late;
I had waited too long and this sealed my fate.
I stood and I cried as they rose out of sight;
Oh, if only I had been ready tonight.

In the words of this poem the meaning is clear;
The coming of Jesus is drawing near.
There's only one life and when comes the last call
We'll find that the Bible was true after all!

(This is a modified version of a poem that is copyright (c)1993
Bethany Farms, Carrollton, IL)

Jesus' return is IMMINENT, and we must be ready for it. Just as there was a first advent, there will be a second... any day now. Are you ready?

Chapter 45. Digging Deeper - Beginnings

READ - *Genesis 1:1-31*

TEXT - *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1 NKJV)*

Theme - God made all, made us, and now offers to remake us in Christ.

Introduction:

Christopher Hitchens, a noted author and a leader to atheists everywhere, died this week.

A couple months ago the news was abuzz with the fact that Steve Jobs, computer geek and one of the founders of Apple Computer had died.

Some years back my favorite secular author, Alf White, died. Most people would know him by his pen name, James Herriot.

Now for some reason, I must confess that the deaths of these men all profoundly saddened me. James Herriot and Steve Jobs were men who had great influence on my life while they were alive. I admired them... both of them... for what they accomplished. I nursed a private hope that someday I might meet them. I guess the closest I'll come now to meeting Steve Jobs is in using the devices he designed. And when I was in England, I visited the home of James Herriot, which is now a museum, and even sat in his old car which he had written about so many times in his books.

I had no such interest in Hitchens. He was an atheist and the author of the best selling book "God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything" and I didn't think I'd have much to discuss with him. However, some of the men I greatly admire have written words of great sadness at his passing. He was apparently, although an avowed unbeliever, somebody who was willing to talk about faith and Christ, openly. Many had an opportunity to witness to him and believed him far from a lost cause.

Pastor Rick Warren, founder of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif., tweeted, "My friend Christopher Hitchens has died. I loved and prayed for him constantly and grieve his loss. He knows the Truth now."

President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Albert Mohler, also tweeted multiple posts in response to Hitchens' passing. He said Hitchens' death "is an excruciating reminder of the consequences of unbelief. We can only pray others will believe." Immediately after his first post, Mohler added, "Few things are so valued in this life as brilliance and eloquence. Neither will matter in the world to come." "The point about Christopher Hitchens is not that he died of unbelief," he concluded, "but that his unbelief is all that matters now. Unspeakably sad."

Indeed... here are three men - James Herriot who died several years back, Steve Jobs who died several months back, and Christopher Hitchens who died several days back. And I find all three deaths to be unspeakably sad. Because even though I always wanted to meet two of them... and now that I read some of the comments about Hitchens I find I would have liked to have met him, too... yet based on the available evidence, I never will.

You see, all three of these men apparently had something in common. None of them, apparently, believed the first four words of the Bible... none of them believed the verse that is our text for this morning.

Note

NOW IT'S VITAL THAT WE REMEMBER THIS IS SOMETHING WE SIMPLY DO NOT KNOW FOR CERTAIN. We never give up hope that somebody will be saved. And until we get to heaven, we'll never know whether men such as these who had heard the gospel during their lifetime, responded to it sometime before their last breath. I like how one man put it, "The Savior still calls people to work in His vineyard when the sun is almost down." He saved the thief on the cross in his dying moments, and we never stop hoping for those we love, right up until the last breath. So these men MAY be with the Lord... we simply don't know.

That being said, though... if these men did, indeed, die as unbelievers, as the evidence seems to suggest, then they are in hell today, and we will never meet them.

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6 NKJV)

Now consider those four words - *In the beginning, God*. Nothing about our faith... nothing that we teach here at FBC... nothing else that we read in God's Word, the Bible... nothing about the Christian faith is possibly true, without those four words. They are the basis of everything else we believe.

Consider then, the rest of the verse - *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*. If the first half is true, there is simply no reason to doubt the second half.

We've been digging deeper into our FBC statement of faith. One of the things written therein is:

WE BELIEVE the Biblical account of the creation of the universe through the direct and immediate creative acts of God.

WE BELIEVE in the unique creation of man in the image and likeness of God and that physical life is His sovereign gift. The deliberate killing of the unborn, the sick, disabled or elderly is wrong and an abomination before Him.

Let's consider that truth this morning: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*.

We believe God created EVERYTHING.

cf. *Genesis 1:1*

It's not considered enlightened, I know. It's even considered ignorant. You risk being considered part of the flat earth society when you let it be known you believe in the Genesis account of creation. So be it. I believe in the Genesis account of creation. Our statement of faith, which we subscribe to as a church says it clearly:

WE BELIEVE the Biblical account of the creation of the universe through the direct and immediate creative acts of God.

- But what about Darwin, preacher? He was wrong.
- But what about the science of evolution, preacher? False science... bad science... erroneous conclusions. It is wrong.
- But what about all the scientific evidence, preacher? What about carbon-14 dating methods? What about the fossil record? What about blah blah blah? WRONG WRONG WRONG!

We Christians better get stiffer spines and be more willing to stand and say NO when the truths of God are denied. Christianity and its beliefs are under attack more right now than they have ever been, and much of it is because most Christians are spineless and won't stand for the truth.

ILLUS - I read this week that a couple of students were suspended for "Tebowing". There's probably more to this story than that, but the fact is, it's becoming more and more common for Christians to meekly cave to the world when it says "don't you dare act like a Christian around here." Where are the Daniel's, who will PRAY OPENLY when doing so carries the threat of the world?

ILLUS - Recently an atheist group in Wisconsin, or Minnesota, or someplace up there, sent a letter to a town in Texas demanding that they remove a nativity scene from the town square. The authority in that town rightly told them to pound sand. It was a refreshing news story in a day when most Christians would have crawled into the fetal position and caved to their godless ravings. I read an article quoting Ray Comfort, an evangelist and author. Ray basically stated that he was fed up with these attacks by atheists on Christianity, and that from this point on whenever he hears of such a target by some atheist group, that is going to be "ground zero" for evangelism. We need more of that!

This pitiful caving to the world is nowhere more evident than when it comes to the Biblical account of creation. Oh the gyrations that Christianity has gone through just to avoid telling the evolutionists to pound sand. Why won't we just stand for the truth of the Bible?

Now listen to me carefully. There is ample scientific evidence to support the Genesis creation account. And there are godly men and women who have spent their lives in developing resources and evidences to show that. The evidence, viewed objectively, supports the creation account far more than it does the evolutionary model. Dating methods that are used to suggest an age of millions of years for the earth, are based on flawed assumptions. The fossil record demonstrates creation, not evolution. And the same is true for every supposed evidence that godless scientists come up with. Go read the works of godly scientists, and you'll see what I mean.

But I'm not one of them. I'm not a scientist. I believe what I believe because God said it in the Bible. And that brings me back to my initial point. If the first four words are true, why question the next six? If you want to know more about the scientific evidence, come see me and I'll point you to more resources than you can digest. But for this morning, will you simply hear the Bible? *IN THE BEGINNING, GOD CREATED...*

We believe it, because it's in the Bible.

"Oh come on, preacher. One little verse? The whole civilized world professes and believes that we evolved from goo and you believe we were created by God because of one little verse?"

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. (John 1:1-3 NKJV)

Before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever You had formed the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God. (Psalm 90:2 NKJV)

This is the history of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, (Genesis 2:4 NKJV)

You alone are the LORD; You have made heaven, The heaven of heavens, with all their host, The earth and everything on it, The seas and all that is in them, And You preserve them all. The host of heaven worships You. (Nehemiah 9:6 NKJV)

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, And all the host of them by the breath of His mouth. (Psalm 33:6 NKJV)

Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands. (Psalm 102:25 NKJV)

Everyone who is called by My name, Whom I have created for My glory; I have formed him, yes, I have made him.” (Isaiah 43:7 NKJV)

Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, And He who formed you from the womb: “I am the LORD, who makes all things, Who stretches out the heavens all alone, Who spreads abroad the earth by Myself; (Isaiah 44:24 NKJV)

For thus says the LORD, Who created the heavens, Who is God, Who formed the earth and made it, Who has established it, Who did not create it in vain, Who formed it to be inhabited: “I am the LORD, and there is no other. (Isaiah 45:18 NKJV)

He has made the earth by His power, He has established the world by His wisdom, And has stretched out the heavens at His discretion. (Jeremiah 10:12 NKJV)

and saying, “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them. (Acts 14:15 NKJV)

God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. (Acts 17:24 NKJV)

For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. (Colossians 1:16 NKJV)

... has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; (Hebrews 1:2 NKJV)

“You, LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands. (Hebrews 1:10 NKJV)

By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible. (Hebrews 11:3 NKJV)

Not just one verse! The whole Bible screams it.

“You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created.” (Revelation 4:11 NKJV)

It matters not what science says. There is just no need to try and fit what God said into what men say. There is no need to adjust it, or modify the perfect, all-knowing, and omnipotent God's explanation to fit the flawed assumption of foolish and lost men. *Let God be true, but every man a liar. (Romans 3:4 NKJV)*

In the beginning God created... (Genesis 1:1)

Now, it's not my goal this morning to get into specifics. I just want to trumpet the general truth that:

WE BELIEVE the Biblical account of the creation of the universe through the direct and immediate creative acts of God.

But having done that, there is one specific creative act that I would like to discuss:

We believe God created you and me.

The first chapter of *Genesis* describes the creation of light, heaven and earth, the land and the seas, vegetation, the sun, moon, and stars, life that flies, life that swims, and life that lives on land.

And... it describes the creation of mankind - cf. *Genesis 1:26-28*

WE BELIEVE in the unique creation of man in the image and likeness of God and that physical life is His sovereign gift. The deliberate killing of the unborn, the sick, disabled or elderly is wrong and an abomination before Him.

The story of God's creation of man, both male and female is a wonderful story. It is developed even more in *Genesis 2*. Again, I'll leave the specifics for your personal study. I hope you'll read it, and marvel at what God has done. Because, as the Psalmist put it, *I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well. (Psalm 139:14 NKJV)*

You are a creation of God! You were created in the image of God! You a fearfully and wonderfully made! You are a marvelous work of the almighty God of the universe! Think of it!

But our statement of faith doesn't just say that you and I were created. It says something else, doesn't it - something that bolsters the words of the Psalmist. It says that "The deliberate killing of the unborn, the sick, disabled or elderly is wrong and an abomination before Him." In other words, you and I were not only created, but because we were created... by God... we are special. Our life has meaning and purpose. YOUR life is special and it has meaning and purpose. EVERY LIFE is special, and it has meaning and purpose. Life is God's sovereign gift.

Now in society today, it is common to find the attitude that values a child's life more than an adult's life. (i.e. except when that child hasn't been born yet, at which point society gives it no value) A story of multiple deaths will appear in our newspapers and comments will flow about how terrible it was because, "some of them were just children." But at the risk of shocking some of you who have bought into the world's view, let me say plainly that if the Bible is true, there is no more value to a child's life than to an elderly person's life. Stated more positively, there is no LESS value to an elderly person's life than to a child's life. If you bristle at that thought, then you need to read your Bible more.

Similarly, there is no less value to a handicapped person's life than to an athlete's life. ALL were created by God, and ALL were created in the image of God, and ALL are loved and precious to the One Who created them.

That is why, at FBC, we will never support "a woman's right to choose" - the world's nice of way of describing abortion. Nor will we ever subscribe to the devil-inspired idea that medical care should be somehow slanted toward those the world considers more productive. We will not support, and we will always fight against, the killing of the unborn, the sick, the disabled, and the elderly, for all these things are an abomination to our God Who created each of them in His image.

Conclusion:

And so, God created it all. What a wonder. Glory! As you pass through God's creation today, look at it... rejoice in it... thank and praise Him for creating it.

And, He created me... He created you... and therefore we are special. I like the way Paul put it in *Ephesians 2:8-10 - We are HIS WORKMANSHIP... (Greek POEIMA - His poem... His masterpiece.)*

Perhaps, though, you're sitting here wondering why this matters to you. What difference does it make whether I was created or whether I evolved from soup? How does that really apply to the situations I face today? And maybe, you're here this morning wishing you could shout out, "If God created me in His image, and made me so special, why is my life such a mess?"

Well, the Bible story doesn't end with creation. If you keep reading in *Genesis*, you find that even though things were perfect and good when God created, something went wrong. We broke it. Sin entered the picture. And the wonderful creator God Who had made you and me to walk with Him and talk with Him in the garden during the cool of the day, now could not look upon the wreck that we had made of it. Now, *your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear. (Isaiah 59:2 NKJV)*

The creator could have wiped it away and started over. He could have thrown his ruined creation in the trash and made a new one. But He chose a different solution. He stepped in to fix it. And the fix is what we celebrate this Christmas week! He sent His Son to Bethlehem, to be born to the virgin Mary... to live a sinless life, and die in your place - to fix the mess of your life!

He, Who had *in the beginning created the heavens and the earth*, now sent His son to recreate it... His Son, Who now says, *Behold, I make all things new!*

He, Who had *in the image of God created us*, now sent His son, of Whom the Bible says, *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. (2 Corinthians 5:17 NKJV)*

ILLUS - I remember sitting in my grandmother's living room as a young man. One particular summer, something strange started happening. She had a large picture window that looked out onto her yard, and one day a beautiful red cardinal bashed right into that window. We were sitting there at the time, and concluded he must have gone grievously astray with his navigation system. Just a mistake, we thought, until he did it again. And again... and again... and again.... That bird flew straight at that window over and over until the window was smeared with blood. He had apparently seen his reflection. And he apparently didn't like what he saw. He was a beautiful creation of God. Apparently, that's not what he saw when he looked in the glass.

If you are like that bird, this morning... if you're thinking "for a creation of God, I sure am a mess," then may I suggest you turn your life over to One Who created you... more specifically, to the One Who came that first Christmas to fix you... to recreate you... to make you new and perfect.

Chapter 46. In the Fullness of Time, the Fullness of God

READ - *Colossians 1:1-23*

TEXT - *For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell. (Colossians 1:19 NKJV)*

THEME - In the baby we celebrate today, we see God... all of God.

Introduction:

Do you remember the old game show called "Password?" One person would have knowledge of a particular word - the password, and he / she would have to help their partner guess the word by giving one word clues.

Well, let's talk about a word this morning - the word INCARNATION. It is a word that would take far more than a single clue to define.

DEFINITION - INCARNATION- the union of divinity with humanity in Jesus Christ (Websters)

QUOTE (Charles Ryrie) - The incarnation was the way in which Christ took on humanity. The word means "in flesh," and the method of the incarnation was the virgin birth.

We have said before, and it bears repeating here - that little baby, conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, and laid in a manger in Bethlehem, was fully God, and fully man. He was God INCARNATE - in flesh.

As Bible-believing Christians, we believe in the virgin birth, and we believe Jesus to be FULLY GOD and FULLY MAN. We have sometimes said that Jesus was and is 100% God and 100% man.

QUOTE (Martin Lloyd-Jones) - In the womb of the virgin Mary, and lying as a helpless babe in the manger, He is still the second Person in the Holy Trinity.

Now don't feel inferior if you find this truth hard to understand.

QUOTE (Martin Luther) - The mystery of the humanity of Christ, that He sunk Himself into our flesh, is beyond all human understanding.

I have to agree with our brother, Martin Luther - when I consider such a truth as the incarnation, I struggle to put it into words... even big words can't contain it. It is simply amazing... and mind-boggling. In every image we see depicting that first Christmas morning, there is a tiny baby - and everytime we need to remind ourselves that that tiny baby is very God!

That's what the word incarnation conveys!

Consider how these great truths were explained by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Colossians:

See the baby - see God!

READ - *Colossians 1:15-18*

He is the image of the invisible God... (Colossians 1:15 NKJV)

In other words, when we see Christ, we see God.

ILLUS - Thomas once asked Jesus to show him the Father. Jesus replied, "Thomas, if you have seen me, you have seen the Father."

QUOTE - Imagine for a moment becoming a baby again: giving up language and muscle coordination, and the ability to eat solid food and control your bladder. God as a fetus! On that day in Bethlehem, the Maker of All That Is took form as a helpless, dependant (Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 2002), p. 106)

Consider that precious little baby, lying in Mary's arms. He is both CREATOR and SUSTAINER of all things. He is God incarnate.

See the baby - see ALL of God!

For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell. (Colossians 1:19 NKJV)

As I searched the Bible for God's message to FBC this morning, I came across this passage, and was struck immediately by that word "fullness." It's used in another passage that is relevant to Christmas morning - *Galatians 4:4-5, But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. (NKJV)*

In that passage, we learn that God sent forth His Son, Jesus, at just the right time... at the exact time God had set for the event - Jesus came. I am reminded of a cantata song sung here some years ago - "At the right time... at the BEST time... He came." The fullness of time.

But in our passage, we see a different thought - in that word FULLNESS we see the EXTENT of the incarnation. That little baby wasn't just part God and part man... He was ALL GOD. All that is God was in Him!

QUOTE (Eugene Peterson) - We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. (Colossians 1:15 The Message)

QUOTE (Eugene Peterson) - So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. (Colossians 1:19 The Message)

I'm not sure that makes it any clearer. I'm not sure we can in any way improve on Paul's words - *For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell. (Colossians 1:19 NKJV)*

Conclusion:

And so, here it is Christmas morning 2011, and I can't help but conclude with a question - What shall we then do about this truth - this INCARNATION?

Well, may I suggest three responses to the incarnation:

1. Believe

Mary was told about the pending incarnation - we read that last night during our Christmas Eve candlelight service. She was told it would occur, and she believed it.

Joseph was told about the incarnation - and he, too, believed it.

QUOTE (Lloyd-Jones) - Joseph "He was given exactly the same explanation; and as we read the story I am afraid we often forget to observe the extraordinary faith of Joseph. He believed the angel's message; he accepted it without any demur, without any hesitation, and he proceeded to act upon it."

Our first response - BELIEVE IT. See the baby for Who He is!

2. Receive

He came to reconcile us with our Father. He came to end the war in which we were engaged with our God, and to bring peace. He came that we who were lost might be saved.

We must believe that, but we must go beyond mere intellectual assent - we must RECEIVE it.

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: 13 who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12-13 NKJV)

You see, that precious baby, in whom ALL the FULLNESS of God dwelt and dwells, was not just a historical figure... He was not just there to show God to us in some academic sense. He was God, reaching out to us, and offering us the way home... offering us the first and best Christmas gift - Himself.

But unless we RECEIVE a gift, we don't have it. Have you received Christ? Are you saved? Do you know what I mean when I say that? If not, don't leave this place today without letting me, or another of your friends here explain it to you. Find somebody who's carrying a Bible and ask, "Do you know how to use that thing?" Find SOMEBODY and ask, because you need to RECEIVE the gift today... before it's too late.

3. Worship

Mary understood, I suppose as much as anybody can, that the baby lying in her arms was in every way, the FULLNESS OF GOD.

And she worshipped...

The shepherds heard it from the angels, and ran to see it for themselves.

And they worshipped...

How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds
In a believer's ear!
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,
And drives away his fear.

It makes the wounded spirit whole,
And calms the troubled breast;
'Tis manna to the hungry soul,
And to the weary, rest.

Dear Name, the Rock on which I build,
My Shield and Hiding Place,
My never failing treasury, filled
With boundless stores of grace!

Jesus! our Savior, Shepherd, Friend,
Prophet and Priest and King,
Our Lord, our Life, our Way, our End,
Accept the praise we bring.

In the Fullness of Time,
the Fullness of God

Weak is the effort of our heart,
And cold our warmest thought;
But when we see Thee as Thou art
We'll praise Thee as we ought.

-- John Newton

Let us ensure once we have believed... and once we have received... that we never lose the wonder of it... that we always see it for what it is, and that we never cease to WORSHIP Christ, the newborn King.

For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell. (Colossians 1:19 NKJV)