

Copyright © 2022 Eric Timothy Brown

All rights reserved. The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary has permission to reproduce and disseminate this document in any form by any means for purposes chosen by the Seminary, including, without limitation, preservation or instruction.

TEACHING THE REDEMPTIVE STORY OF THE BIBLE TO
INCREASE BIBLICAL LITERACY AT BRAINARD
AVENUE BAPTIST CHURCH IN
COUNTRYSIDE, ILLINOIS

A Project
Presented to
the Faculty of
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by
Eric Timothy Brown
May 2022

APPROVAL SHEET

TEACHING THE REDEMPTIVE STORY OF THE BIBLE TO
INCREASE BIBLICAL LITERACY AT BRAINARD
AVENUE BAPTIST CHURCH IN
COUNTRYSIDE, ILLINOIS

Eric Timothy Brown

Read and Approved by:

Brian J. Vickers (Faculty Supervisor)

Joseph C. Harrod

Date _____

I dedicate this project to my loving wife, Clarissa,
and to my three sons, Thomas, Grant, and Andrew.

May your love for the Bible increase as you see the beauty of the story.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|--|------|
| LIST OF FIGURES | vi |
| PREFACE | vii |
| Chapter | |
| 1. INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| Context | 2 |
| Rationale | 4 |
| Purpose | 6 |
| Goals | 6 |
| Research Methodology | 7 |
| Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations | 8 |
| Conclusion | 9 |
| 2. HOW THE BIBLE ITSELF EXPOSES THE NEED FOR BIBLICAL LITERACY | 11 |
| Biblical Literacy Helps Christians Read the Bible Rightly | 13 |
| The Book of Acts: Examples of the Apostles Demonstrating Christ-Centered Reading of the Scriptures | 23 |
| Conclusion | 36 |
| 3. THE ROLE OF HABITS IN DEVELOPING BIBLICAL LITERACY | 37 |
| Christians Must Actively Fight against the Nemesis of Digital Distraction | 38 |
| Christians Must Develop Habits That Lead to Clear and Sustained Thinking | 41 |
| Christians Must Actively Work to Develop Habits of Sound Bible Reading | 48 |

| Chapter | Page |
|---|------|
| Conclusion | 57 |
| 4. DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF TEACHING THE REDEMPTIVE STORYLINE OF THE BIBLE TO INCREASE BIBLICAL LITERACY | 58 |
| Development of the Sermon Series..... | 58 |
| Implementation of the Sermon Series | 61 |
| Evaluation of the Sermon Series | 62 |
| 5. PROJECT EVALUATION | 64 |
| Evaluation of the Purpose of the Project..... | 64 |
| Evaluation of the Goals of the Project | 65 |
| Strengths of the Project | 78 |
| Weaknesses of the Project..... | 78 |
| What I Would Do Differently | 79 |
| Theological Reflections | 80 |
| Personal Reflections..... | 81 |
| Conclusion | 81 |
| Appendix | |
| 1. BASICS OF THE BIBLICAL STORYLINE SURVEY..... | 82 |
| 2. SERMONS PREACHED JANUARY-APRIL 2021 | 86 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY..... | 155 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| Figure | Page |
|---|------|
| 1. Frequently Missed Questions | 66 |
| 2. Similarities Between New Beginnings in the Bible's Story | 67 |
| 3. How the Bible is Arranged | 69 |
| 4. Improvement from Pre to Post Survey | 74 |
| 5. Survey Score Distribution | 75 |
| 6. Paired Respondent Survey Scores | 76 |
| 7. Paired Respondent Survey Scores | 76 |
| 8. Statistical Comparison of Mean Scores | 77 |

PREFACE

Countless individuals have influenced my life, my ministry, and my understanding of the Bible in ways that surely affected the development of this project without me even realizing it. Beyond those people, however, numerous wonderful people made direct contributions that I wish to acknowledge.

My parents exposed me (and my six siblings) to the gospel, disciplined me, and gave me their blessing and encouragement in pursuing theological education toward gospel ministry.

During high school, college, and seminary, Shawn Albert and Nelson McGeoch invested unfathomable amounts of time in me while showing me the foundation of a healthy church in their unflinching commitment to the sufficiency of Scripture. They did this in their personal discipleship as well as in their careful weekly preparation of sermons and Bible studies.

The undergraduate and seminary faculty of Bob Jones University, especially Randy Jaeggli, Gary Reimers, and Layton Talbert, graciously invested in me, mentored me, and modeled humility and kindness in all their interactions. Dr. Jaeggli has been a father-figure to me for over a decade and exudes generosity and joy.

Jim Hamilton and Michael Lawrence were two of the people, whether they realized it or even knew who I was, who compelled me to write my project on Biblical Theology. Their love for the storyline of the Bible (and the God of the story) was clear in their writing and their preaching (especially in the case of Jim Hamilton) and teaching (in the case of Michael Lawrence, who taught my first seminar in this program).

Tim Brittain, Jon Cheek, Kellen Funk, and Aaron Menikoff read the drafts of

my sermons for this project and gave insightful feedback. Their comments made my sermons better, kept me motivated each week, and served our church family well. They have all been friends for many years and I admire each of them for their faithfulness to Christ and the church.

Don Burnett proved that a friend in need is a friend indeed. After months of guilt and discouragement with lack of progress on this project, he got me on track and kept me there until I finished just before the deadline.

Brian Vickers patiently waited (and waited) for me to send him content, and then gave valuable feedback that immensely improved this project. His encouragement down the stretch was life-giving.

The elders of Anniston Bible Church (2014-2020) and Brainard Avenue Baptist Church (2020-present) shepherded me while I also sought to shepherd them. Both churches and groups of elders encouraged me in my continuing education and were a delight to serve.

My beloved wife Clarissa and my charming sons Thomas, Grant, and Andrew have given me more than I can begin to imagine. They let me sneak into my office to read and write for hours on end and made me feel loved and appreciated when I returned.

Finally, how do I thank the eternal God for his saving grace, his unfailing kindness, and his preserving faithfulness? May his grace sustain my faith and my ministry until I come to the end of the story in “the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Heb 11:10).

Eric Brown

Countryside, Illinois

May 2022

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

First-time visitors to a large city like Chicago are often overwhelmed by the scope of the city, and by the unfamiliar sights, sounds, and smells that they encounter at every turn. After obtaining a detailed map, though, they know what landmarks to look for and how to get to them. Eventually, after several hours or days of touring the city, sights begin to look familiar and the visitors can begin to locate where they are, at least relatively. Compare that sparse knowledge and awareness, however, with that of a veteran tour guide or taxi driver. He knows multiple ways to get from one location to the next, knows what side streets will help him avoid congested traffic, and can navigate his guests while talking to them in an educated way about the city at the same time. The difference between the tourist and the tour guide is time, experience, and dedication to the task.

This analogy is similar to the experience of those who are Bible-reading novices and those who have devoted years to learning the Bible as if it were a printed map. Teaching church members to navigate the terrain of the Bible fluently is one of the primary goals of a church. As such, the leadership of Brainard Avenue Baptist Church is committed to leading the church toward being a healthy church. No church, however, is healthy if its leaders and members are not able to understand the map that is the overall storyline of the Bible. For this reason, Brainard Avenue Baptist Church seeks to increase biblical literacy in every member, so that they will glorify God with their lives, worship him wholeheartedly, and effectively serve him through Christ-centered living.

Context

Brainard Avenue Baptist Church (BABC) possesses many strengths, as evidenced by the priority placed on expository preaching, Christ-centered worship services, biblical counseling, and pursuing the glory of God in every part of its ministry. The church has the reputation amongst other believers of being serious about the gospel, the Scriptures, worship, and helping people in their sin and suffering. Like every other church, however, BABC is beset by a number of weaknesses. Perhaps at the root of many of those weaknesses is a lack of understanding of Scripture's overarching coherent message and storyline. Most Christians at BABC (and probably in general) are not able to articulate the Bible's storyline satisfactorily or see and describe how one passage connects to or interprets another—which, for the purpose of this project, is how I define biblical literacy. Many members at BABC lack biblical literacy; while they possess a basic familiarity with Bible stories (or poems, prophecies, etc.) and even their locations in the canon, most are unable to identify why those stories are included or how they connect to the Bible's storyline and themes.

This weakness in biblical literacy at BABC manifests in many ways. First, many members struggle to read the Bible regularly, particularly the Old Testament. In asking individuals why they do not read their Bibles more often, the answer often comes down to a lack of understanding of what they are reading. When they do make time to read, perhaps they will read a Psalm or a part of an epistle or a familiar story from the gospels. But they often neglect large sections, such as Old Testament narrative or the latter prophets. Related to and indicative of this weakness is the way that many Christians at BABC view the Bible as a collection of small stories and principles to live by, but are not able to discern an overarching storyline that ties all of Scripture together. The fact that the Bible feels like a foreign city to many members, in that they do not understand how its various parts cohere, often leads members to feel less confident in their ability to

engage meaningfully in Bible study groups or to discuss how they are growing spiritually in conversations with one another.

Second, for many in the congregation, the lack of biblical literacy results in hesitancy in evangelistic efforts in the community. The gospel message—that Jesus Christ came to earth to save rebellious sinners, and to make all things new—is the sum message of the whole Bible. To articulate this good news on the spur of the moment with a stranger at a coffee shop or with a neighbor over a shared meal, however, requires more than mere familiarity with the Romans Road. It requires some reasonable degree of a working understanding of biblical theology. Biblical illiteracy, I argue, results in a hesitancy to share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Another weakness related to and, I would argue, resulting from biblical illiteracy is a general lack of ability to have routine, helpful, biblical conversations about sin and suffering with one another. Many people are quick to dispense a Bible verse or spiritual platitude about obvious sin habits or difficult trials without first considering whether they have heard enough information, whether the person they are talking to was looking for an encouraging reminder or rather a listening ear, and without first asking whether the advice they are eager to share is more culturally conditioned than scripturally rooted. As a result, feelings often get hurt, relationships are occasionally fractured, and biblical truth and wisdom frequently fail to be passed effectively from generation to generation.

Similar to this problem is the common Christian practice of proof-texting positions due to the inability to make sound, biblical-theological arguments. Of course, it is a positive situation when a Christian can give a verse or a few verses of support to show that marriage is between one man and one woman, for instance, or to defend the truth that salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone. But how much stronger of an argument can Christians make when they show that the whole Bible, not just individual sentences, supports those claims? The Bible provides holistic answers to reveal that there is a

Christian way of thinking about particular social issues. The wide-spread inability to argue theologically rather than merely proof-texting is one more piece of evidence that biblical literacy is lacking at BABC.

Finally, biblical illiteracy reveals itself through a subtle devaluation of the sufficiency of Scripture. Rather than looking to the Bible for the answers to life's problems, many Christians at BABC tend to overemphasize the role of government (such as through the influence of Supreme Court decisions) or look to secular solutions to resolve their concerns.¹ Simply put, many Christians at BABC are imbibing the worldview of the secular society rather than that of the Bible.

The elders of Brainard Avenue Baptist Church have sought to address this problem in various ways, such as through the regular means of expository preaching and promoting quality theological resources. But these efforts have only scratched the surface in addressing biblical illiteracy.

Rationale

Biblical literacy is in crisis. This is true at Brainard Avenue Baptist Church, as it is throughout America as a whole. A weakness this large and significant can seem overwhelming. With intensive effort over several months, however, Brainard Avenue Baptist Church saw measurable growth in biblical literacy.

At its most basic level, I am defining biblical literacy as *the ability to read the Bible accurately and draw relevant connections between one part of the Bible and another.*² The biblically literate believer can properly place the various pieces of

¹ The faith that is required to view these secular challenges from a Christian perspective is especially possible, I argue, for those who have developed a biblical framework through increasing in biblical literacy.

² I am making a distinction in this project between biblical knowledge, as important as that is, and biblical literacy. Someone who knows the books of the Bible in order, can recite the Ten Commandments, and can even tell someone where to find stories such as Gideon's fleece and David's sin with Bathsheba might possess biblical knowledge and still lack biblical literacy as defined here. Someone can know all of those facts without knowing how to navigate their Bible in a way that makes them better disciples, evangelists, or church members. In other words, it is possible that even an unbeliever can be

Scripture—with their differing purposes, contexts, and genres—into the unified story of redemption that God has revealed in history and through his word.

Elders of a church in this situation cannot neglect this problem or treat it lightly. A failure at this level will result in BABC not fulfilling its purpose as a church of glorifying God, loving each other as a family, and reaching the world with the gospel. Many reasons point to the need for this project.

First, members at BABC should all be able to see how the Bible connects to Jesus (Luke 24:27, 44; John 1:45; 5:39), which is difficult without being biblically literate. If every passage in some way either anticipates the gospel, or describes the gospel, or explains the implications of the gospel, then Christians must learn to see that reality on every page of the Bible. This is precisely the way Jesus read and spoke about Scripture (Luke 24:13-35).³

Second, Christians are commanded to meditate on the Bible (Josh 1:8; cf. Ps 1:2).⁴ Meditation involves working over a passage from many different angles, and biblical literacy leads to richer, more satisfying meditation.

Third, as those commanded to share the message of the Bible with others (Matt 28:19-20; cf. Ps 78:4), members of BABC must know that message well.⁵ Biblical literacy increases the understanding and motivation needed to proclaim the gospel to unbelievers confidently and persuasively.

strong in Bible knowledge, but it is almost unfathomable that an unbeliever could be biblically literate.

³ As Chapter 2 will demonstrate, the way a passage connects to or points to Christ and the gospel varies significantly. There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to Christ-centered Bible reading. Some passages have a straighter or brighter line to the gospel. Reading individual portions of the Bible with the whole biblical story in view (the canonical context, as some describe it) is essential.

⁴ While Joshua 1:8 was addressed specifically to an individual in a particular historical context, the New Testament itself suggests that its message is for all Christians (Rom 15:4; 2 Tim 3:16).

⁵ I understand Jesus to be referring to the message of the gospel (which is itself the message of the whole Bible, when read with a zoomed-out lens) when he says to “make disciples . . . [by] teaching them all I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19-20). He is not simply referring to individual portions of his teaching ministry, as if the imperatives are the only parts his disciples are to teach to the nations.

Fourth, biblical literacy protects Christians from committing doctrinal errors and holding heretical views (as 1 John and Jude, among other New Testament epistles, were written to address). On the other side of the coin, it is also necessary for a defense of the faith (1 Pet 3:15).⁶

Finally, a renewed emphasis on biblical literacy will make Bible intake more desirable and fruitful. Believers are commanded to grow, and Bible intake is one of the primary means by which Christian growth happens (1 Pet 2:2). Thus, this emphasis will have profound effects on the spiritual growth of the individuals and families of BABC. Knowing the message of the Bible, and making legitimate connections to the overall message from any given passage, will also make them better disciple-makers and better disciples themselves.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to increase biblical literacy among the members of Brainard Avenue Baptist Church in Countryside, Illinois by teaching the redemptive story of the Bible.

Goals

To accomplish this purpose, this project focused on executing three related goals.

1. The first goal was to assess a group of adults at BABC on their current understanding (literacy) of the Bible and, particularly, its storyline and themes.
2. The second goal was to develop a ten-week sermon series for increasing biblical literacy at BABC.
3. The third goal was to increase biblical literacy by means of teaching the developed

⁶ One could argue that ancient heretics such as Arius, or modern-day false teachers such as Bart Ehrman, were or are biblically literate. They certainly had (or have) a tremendous degree of biblical knowledge. This is where the distinction between knowledge and literacy (as I conceive of it) is crucial. At issue is the ability to read the Bible *accurately* (as Jesus and the Apostles did and taught others to do), not simply knowing the most information possible.

sermon series.

These goals cumulatively worked to ensure that the project was successfully implemented and will have lasting effects at BABC. Definitive research methodology demonstrates the effectiveness of the goals.⁷

Research Methodology

Three goals determined the effectiveness of this project. The first goal was to assess a group of adults at BABC on their current understanding of the Bible and, particularly, its storyline and themes. This goal was measured by writing and administering a survey to the adults who were in the worship services. Prior to the first sermon, members of BABC completed a Basics of the Biblical Storyline (BBS) survey.⁸ This survey assessed the ability of each member to identify the storyline in various passages and connect a given passage with various elements of the storyline. This goal would be considered successfully met when thirty members completed the BBS and the results were compiled electronically.

The second goal was to develop a ten-week preaching series for increasing biblical literacy at BABC. The curriculum taught members to read the Bible with understanding and accuracy—it provided them with the map they need to move from one location in the Bible to the next. The curriculum traced the biblical storyline from multiple angles, through what are often considered the four acts of the drama of Scripture: creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. An additional element provided suggestions for fighting distraction so that Christians can maximize their time in Bible

⁷ All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

⁸ See appendix 1. The average adult Sunday attendance at Brainard Avenue Baptist Church is 40.

reading and study, since tracing the redemptive storyline requires focused concentration.⁹ This goal was measured by the expert panel who utilized a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability of the curriculum. This goal would be considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criteria met or exceeded the sufficient level. If the 90 percent benchmark was not initially met, the material would be revised until it met the standard.

The third goal was to increase biblical literacy by means of preaching the developed sermon series. This preaching took place in the normal Sunday morning worship services. This goal would be measured by administering a pre and post survey which would be used to measure the change in biblical literacy. This goal would be considered successfully met when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre and post survey scores.

Definitions and Delimitations

The following definitions of key terms will be used in this ministry project:

Biblical literacy. I am defining biblical literacy as *the ability to read the Bible in a way that is accurate historically and canonically, and to draw relevant connections between its various parts, particularly between the OT and NT.*¹⁰

Biblical theology. Brian Rosner defines biblical theology as

theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church. It proceeds with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyze and synthesize the Bible's teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus.¹¹

⁹ See chapter 3. The basic idea here is that one of the primary obstacles to biblical literacy in this era of history is the disruptive effect of hand-held devices, computers and television. Through a restructuring of personal and family habits, Christians will be far more likely to engage with and meditate on Scripture with greater clarity, depth, and comprehension. I make applications to this theme in sermons frequently.

¹⁰ I consider biblical literacy as the fruit of the discipline of Biblical Theology. (Exegetical Theology, Systematic Theology and Historical Theology are intricately linked to biblical literacy as well.) The concern is that Christians know not just what the Bible *says* but what the Bible *means*.

¹¹ Brian S. Rosner, "Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T.

Perhaps more simply, Michael Lawrence adds that

biblical theology is about reading the Bible, not as if it's sixty-six separate books, but a single book with a single plot—God's glory displayed through Jesus Christ. Biblical theology is therefore about discovering the unity of the Bible in the midst of its diversity. It's about understanding what we might call the Bible's metanarrative.¹²

Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, leaning on the work of Rosner, argue that

biblical theology

is concerned with the overall message of *the whole Bible*. It seeks to understand *the parts in relation to the whole*. Biblical theology is interested not merely in words and word studies but also in concepts and themes, as it traces out the Bible's own storyline *on the Bible's own terms*, following the plotline to its culmination in Christ.¹³

Two delimitations will be placed on the project. First, this preaching will take place in a worship service of roughly forty members, but also possibly taught in a small-group Bible study at a time that allows members with challenging work schedules (or are involved in other ministries such as the nursery) to participate. Second, the teaching element of the project will be confined to a twelve-week timeframe. This will give adequate time to prepare and preach the curriculum and to conduct the post-series survey after the sermon series is completed.

Conclusion

For the person struggling to move from one point in the Bible to another, or to get from what is seemingly a small alleyway (a less-familiar passage) to a major highway (the gospel message), a well-developed understanding of the storyline of the Bible provides the surest and smoothest path. The categories of creation, fall, redemption, and

Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 10 (italics removed from original).

¹² Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 15.

¹³ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 45. Italics original.

new creation saturate every book and genre of Scripture, and many passages actually teach about or allude to more than one of those categories. Nothing can replace the time and effort that are required to develop well-worn paths to the Bible's thoroughfares. But churches can and must provide the basic road map of the story of redemption to enable members to grow in biblical understanding. By clearly and persistently teaching the story of redemption, Brainard Avenue Baptist Church can help its members to grow in biblical literacy.

CHAPTER 2

HOW THE BIBLE ITSELF EXPOSES THE NEED FOR BIBLICAL LITERACY

Reading the Bible is one of the most vital disciplines for the Christian life. It is a book of supreme importance, but also a book with some inherent challenges and of some difficulty to understand, especially some parts more than others. Many believers, for instance, can regularly be confused and discouraged by what they read and by an inability to comprehend it. Long lists of unusual names can leave readers bored. It can be difficult to know what to obey, and to know how what they read applies directly to Christian living today.

Whether for a new believer or someone who has followed Jesus in a healthy church for many years, Christians can struggle to know what part of the Bible to read first (or next). Is every part of the Bible of equal importance? If not, what parts should readers focus on?

The Bible deserves the Christian's highest level of interest, examination, and investment of time and energy. It is a collection of 66 books, written over the span of about 1500 years in a variety of places by dozens of human authors, all under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. These 66 books demonstrate a remarkable level of unity despite the diversity of audiences and cultures represented by each book.

That being said, Christians struggle to know how God intends for them to read the Bible. That goes for reading the Bible as a whole, as well as for reading individual passages. Some read the Bible as primarily about themselves. Some read passages allegorically when a straight-forward understanding of the text is better. At the other

extreme, some refuse to see that some passages are clearly intended to be understood metaphorically or figuratively, and instead read nearly every passage with rigid literalism. Then there are the habits of some Christians who read the Bible as a collection of wise sayings, as an instruction manual for how to receive God's greatest blessings in life, or as merely a prophetic timeline.

The Bible itself, however, tells Christians how they should read Scripture. Foremost, Christians must read the Bible with an eye to seeing how the whole Bible is telling the story of a loving, Triune God who created the world and everything in it, including mankind himself. But man rebelled against his maker, resulting in God cursing the world. God the Son, Jesus, came to earth to redeem mankind and to restore all things. In the end, all will be made right, and God will receive eternal praise from his people in a new heaven and new earth.

With that general storyline in mind, then, Christians must read the Bible with a lens to how the person and work of Jesus Christ is the solution to man's problem of sin and rebellion.¹ Every passage, in both the Old and New Testaments, is in some way connected to the gospel of Jesus. The way one portion of Scripture connects to or reveals the gospel may be clearer than the way another passage does, but Christians who invest the needed time and effort are able to reflect thoughtfully on how a passage relates to the gospel.

Why should Christians pursue the goal of personally reading the Bible well, when it would be so much easier to let pastors or other mature Christians do it for them? Is it not enough that Christians read the Bible in the first place? Is it asking too much to require that all Christians read the Bible in a certain way, or should pastors just be thankful that the average Christian reads the Bible at all? The answer is that, whether

¹ This paragraph and the one preceding it both state this argument as an imperative. While the Bible itself does not give this command, due to the nature of the Bible as a whole, I believe it is appropriate and necessary for Christians to consider the Bible as a story that has necessary implications to all of life.

explicitly or implicitly, the Bible itself calls Christians to read, comprehend, and synthesize the Bible accurately and thoroughly.

Biblical Literacy Helps Christians Read the Bible Rightly (Luke 24:13-35)

It could sound almost arrogant to hear that Christians can read the Bible “rightly,” because that word obviously implies that Christians can read the Bible “wrongly” as well. How can there possibly be a wrong way to read the Bible?

Christians can err in Bible reading in multiple ways. Christians should not read the Bible as a collection of wisdom sayings or as a personal instruction manual. More specifically, the Bible is rightly understood when Christians read it and interpret it first and foremost as a story. It may be more than a story in some parts, but Scripture is never less than a metanarrative. It is not, however, only a story to tell—it is also a story Christians inhabit and in which they are personally engaged. But when considering the Bible as a story, perhaps the single most important element is reading the Bible with an eye on the person and work of Jesus as the heart of the story. To read the Bible any other way is to read the Bible deficiently. Christians must understand the whole Bible “in light of Jesus and the gospel and the kingdom inaugurated in His coming.”² This is where Luke 24 comes into focus.

Luke 24 recounts the day when Jesus was raised from the dead (vv. 1-7) and his followers began to hear reports that he was no longer in the tomb (vv. 8-12). Verse 13 describes that two disciples were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, and as they journeyed they were emotionally distressed. As they progressed down the road, however, Jesus himself joined with them and entered the conversation.

² David M. King, *Your Old Testament Sermon Needs to Get Saved: A Handbook for Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 2021) 13.

Readers of this passage may marvel that these two disciples, who surely knew and spent time with Jesus, would be so blind that they would not recognize who their new walking companion was. But verse 16 is describing more than just a physical struggle they had to recognize this man. Theologically, the verse is subtly describing a work of God. Luke records that “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”³ This statement is an example of what theologians often call a divine passive—in other words, while the text does not explicitly refer to God, the action Luke describes only makes sense as being a work of God.⁴ He is the one who kept their eyes from recognizing Jesus; they were experiencing a spiritual reality, not just a physical one. Why would God do this? Darrell Bock argues that “one purpose of the verse is to show the reality of Jesus’ bodily resurrection. Luke tells the story with dramatic flair, as the reader knows more about the situation than those who experienced the event—at least at this point. Part of the drama is when and how they will realize who their discussion partner is.”⁵

Jesus entered into the conversation and asked them what they are talking about, though he almost certainly knew.⁶ Luke, who in his gospel account regularly describes the emotions of his characters, paused in verse 17 to note that these two followers “stood still, looking sad.” Perhaps this question was salt in the wounds for people whose entire

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the English Standard Version.

⁴ Bock agrees that the most likely reason they did not recognize him was that “God [concealed] this information,” as opposed to the problem being “the disciples’ own blindness” or seeing “Satan at fault.” Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 2 (9:51-24:53), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1909.

⁵ Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1910. Stein expresses the same sentiment: “This lack of recognition allowed Jesus to teach the necessity of his death and resurrection and to show how this was the fulfillment of Scripture.” Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary, vol 24 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 610.

⁶ Of course, it is unclear how much Jesus knew in his resurrected body. Was he still bound by human weakness at this point, so that any knowledge he had was a direct work of the Holy Spirit? It seems unlikely that he resumed his omniscience as the Son of God until his ascension. But what is clear is that, though these two men “do not know the identity of this fellow traveler, yet they are astonished that he does not know of recent events; in fact, Jesus is the only one who is genuinely ‘in the know.’” Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 486.

lives had been thrown into confusion and sorrow over the past few days. These men were simply incredulous that someone would not have heard about “the things that [had] happened” in Jerusalem that weekend.

When Jesus provoked them to elaborate on what they had in mind, they answered him clearly and robustly.

Who Was Jesus? (vv. 19-24)

Cleopas and the other disciple understood that Jesus was “of Nazareth,” which brings the reader back to Luke 4:16-30 and his initial sermon in his hometown. They also knew that he was “a prophet mighty in deed and word,” referring to both his miracle working and his stunningly clear, compelling, and convicting sermons (again, cf. Luke 4). That he was a prophet “before God and all the people” underscores the significance of his ministry in the eyes of these men—they had anticipated that Jesus was the “prophet like Moses” foretold in Deuteronomy 18:15-18.

The disciples continued to describe what they understood of Jesus. He was “delivered up to be condemned to death” (v. 20) and he was crucified. All of this was stunning because, as they expressed, “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (v. 21). These men shared common expectations for the Messiah, but as Jesus will shortly describe, they were misunderstood, or at least short-sighted, expectations. Nothing they said was wrong; they simply did not go far enough. Green observes, “What is lacking in their interpretation of Jesus’ significance . . . is the understanding that, as God’s prophet, Jesus must fulfill the destiny of the prophets: rejection, suffering, and death.”⁷

⁷ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 487.

The Things Concerning Himself (vv. 25-27)

In his response, Jesus describes these men by several terms. He said they were “foolish,” a term that readers should not understand as derogatory or harsh, but one that simply addresses the men’s short-sightedness in their understanding of the Scriptures. The fact that they are “slow of heart to believe all that the prophets said” draws out this deep-seated “failure to orient themselves fully around Jesus’ teaching, not to their need merely for remedial education.”⁸ It was not that they had merely failed to memorize a chart or list of vocabulary terms. Their problem was far deeper and more significant. They had failed to connect the dots that were all over their Scriptures written by the prophets.⁹ The main truth they had missed was that the Messiah would have to suffer, and only then would he “enter into his glory” (v. 26).

At that point Jesus shattered the preconceptions of the disciples and constructed an entirely new paradigm. He showed that in both the books of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy) and the books of the prophets (Joshua through the Book of the Twelve, according to the Hebrew arrangement of the Bible), the whole Old Testament is only rightly understood when it is read as anticipating and foretelling the person and work of Jesus himself.

Important to grasp is the note that “he interpreted to them.” This simple phrase highlights that right interpretation is crucial, and it also assumes what is generally

⁸ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 488.

⁹ The most natural understanding of the identification of “the prophets” in v. 25 is to see them as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other canonical writing prophets. Rebecca McLaughlin, in her apologetic work *Confronting Christianity*, sees a reference here to the women who saw Jesus earlier that morning (v. 10-11). Based on the larger context of what she is writing, she seems to understand this reference to the “prophets (who) have spoken” as a way that Luke elevates women. This is not to say that Luke does not elevate women in his gospel account; that point is indisputable. What is disputable is that “the prophets” of whom Jesus speaks are the women who came to the empty tomb that morning and then went and told the disciples that Jesus was risen. It is far more likely, and a far clearer reading contextually, to assume that Jesus is referring to the same “Prophets” as he does later in Luke 24:44 rather than to the female disciples these men had encountered earlier that day. Perhaps part of the confusion is that the ESV capitalizes “Prophets” in v. 44 but not in v. 25, possibly because of considerations such as the one McLaughlin raises. Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World’s Largest Religion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 138.

obvious, that it is possible to misinterpret the text. In other words, not every reading of a text is guaranteed to be correct! Christians must read the Bible in a certain way—again, must read “rightly,” to use previous terminology—or what they conclude from their Bible will fall short of its Holy Spirit-intended meaning.

But the larger point is that “in all the Scriptures,” Jesus is at the heart of a correct reading. That is not to say that his person and work is described in every passage in the same way, but that every part of Scripture is ultimately about him and his restoring work. As Joel Green insightfully notes, “what has happened with Jesus can be understood only in light of the Scriptures, yet the Scriptures themselves can be understood only in light of what has happened with Jesus.”¹⁰ Stein similarly remarks, “Jesus did not designate which prophets or where these prophets spoke of him. For Jesus and the Evangelists ‘all’ the prophets ‘everywhere’ spoke of him.”¹¹

Though this passage is lacking in detail and leaves significant questions unanswered (Did Jesus teach a specific method? What passages did he use as examples?), this textual unit from Luke 24 is at the heart of reading the whole Bible rightly. Luke records no hermeneutical checklist nor an extended outline of Jesus’s commentary (the only outline he provides is simply “Moses” and “the prophets,”), but the apostle does give the basic framework Christians need. Luke will later provide, in the book of Acts, both brief and extended examples of interpreting the Scriptures through a Christological framework. But the message is clear: if readers miss Jesus, they miss what they are supposed to be seeing. Quite simply, “all of the Scriptures have their fulfillment in a Messiah who suffers.”¹²

¹⁰ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 485.

¹¹ Stein, *Luke*, 612.

¹² Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 488.

Burning Hearts (vv. 28-35)

In the next scene in the passage, these men were so astonished at what this fellow journeyman had taught them that they could not bear the thought of ending the conversation abruptly, so they invited him to spend the night with them. Luke describes that as they sat around the table that evening with Jesus, these disciples had their next life-altering experience. As verse 31 describes, “their eyes were opened”—another divine passive. The Lord was the one who opened their eyes, just as the Lord had been the one in verse 16 who “kept (them) from recognizing him.”¹³ This was a spiritual understanding, not merely a physical one. Stein addresses misunderstandings of what is happening here: “Attempts to explain this recognition as due to their identification of Jesus’ voice, his unique blessing, his special way of breaking bread, seeing the holes in his hands, seeing a gesture of some sort peculiar to Jesus should be rejected. Luke gave no hint of this.”¹⁴

After this stunning moment, Jesus vanished, and the men began to relive the events of the day. They grasped at words to explain what the experience of hearing Jesus interpret the message of the Bible was like. They expressed the moment, in verse 32, as having “burning” hearts. That Jesus “opened the Scriptures” is a picturesque metaphor for explaining and interpreting the Scriptures in the way Jesus did in verses 25-27.¹⁵

What becomes clear in this passage is that these disciples were not yet “biblically literate” (and by implication, neither were any of the others). They may have known the Old Testament passages, but they missed what they were really about. The moral of the story, in one very important sense at least, is that Christians are not biblically

¹³ Bock agrees that this verse is the answer to the dilemma earlier in the passage. “Luke uses language that reverses what was said about their lack of recognition in 24:16.” Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1920.

¹⁴ Stein, *Luke*, 613.

¹⁵ Anecdotally, this is an appropriate way for Christians to pray before reading the Bible themselves (or for pastors to pray for their congregation before preaching), that the Holy Spirit would open their eyes to the truth in the text (cf. Ps 119:18).

literate if they fail to recognize that a passage is describing the glory and ministry of Jesus in some facet. Granted, the path to preaching the gospel in Psalm 19, as one example, is not the same as the path to preaching the gospel in Psalm 22, or even Psalm 23, but that does not mean a legitimate path does not exist.

Possible Ways for Preaching Christ from Psalm 19

In light of Jesus's teaching in Luke 24, someone teaching or preaching from Psalm 19 could faithfully preach the gospel in a variety of ways. For one, a teacher could connect Psalm 19:1-2 with Hebrews 1:1-4, where the author declares that Christ is the fullest revelation of the glory of God and the clearest way in which God has communicated with man. He could also point to Psalm 19:11, that in keeping God's commands "there is great reward," but then remind the listeners that no one has ever kept God's law except Christ, who has perfectly fulfilled the law through his active obedience. A third relatively straight path to the gospel is in verse 13: believers are "innocent of great transgression" only through Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross.

Luke 24 as a Lens

Christians may rightly ask whether it is legitimate to read Luke 24 as a lens for the rest of the Bible. Should Christians truly "see Jesus" in every passage, or is this a forced interpretation? First, it should be noted that criticism of a Christ-centered hermeneutic can be valid and necessary. It is indeed possible for Bible readers seemingly to look for Jesus behind every bush and under every rock and so do injustice to the message of the text.

Just because that danger exists, however, does not mean that Bible readers should avoid seeking to legitimately connect each passage in some way to the message of Jesus Christ as the center of divine revelation. As Jason DeRouchie helpfully argues, "Many Old Testament teachers suggest that we should approach Jesus' Bible as though

Jesus hadn't come. Yet this was never God's intent. Like any good mystery novel, reading the last chapter forces us to rethink the entire plotline." He later adds, "We must read the Old Testament as Christians and not as though Christ had not come, for this is how the divine author intended us to read his Book. Once Luke and John, Paul and Peter encountered the resurrected Christ, they could not help but read their Old Testament in the knowledge of Christ's person and work."¹⁶

The crucial element in this process is making connections *legitimately*. Perhaps one of the best guides in recent decades on making legitimate hermeneutical connections to the gospel, particularly from the Old Testament, is Sidney Greidanus. He lays out seven distinct ways to preach Christ from the Old Testament, summarized below.¹⁷

1. The way of Redemptive-Historical Progression
2. The way of Promise-Fulfillment
3. The way of Typology
4. The way of Analogy
5. The way of Longitudinal Themes
6. The way of New Testament References
7. The way of Contrast

DeRouchie helps clarify how Christians can rightly read the Old Testament with a Christ-centered perspective. "This kind of Christ-centrality does not require that we think every Old Testament passage is *about* Christ," he writes. "But it does

¹⁶ Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), 366.

¹⁷ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 227.

necessitate that we consider how every one *points* to him.”¹⁸ He also elaborates on the necessary ingredients for faithfully interpreting a text in a Christ-centered way: they are “humility, prayerfulness, and solid biblical interpretation that draws on the cultural-historical setting, the linguistic data, the immediate literary context, and the broader canonical context of every passage we consider.”¹⁹

Just as Greidanus provides seven ways to preach Christ from the Old Testament, DeRouchie also identifies seven ways Christians can “encounter and ultimately proclaim Christ and the gospel from the Old Testament.” His list is provided below in summary form.²⁰

Christ fulfills the Old Testament by:

1. Standing as the physical embodiment of YHWH.
2. Bringing us the righteousness to which the Old Testament bears witness.
3. Supplying us the power to love and thus fulfill the law.
4. Operating as the object of direct Old Testament messianic predictions.
5. Serving as the climax of all salvation-historical trajectories.
6. Both similarity and contrast.
7. Functioning as the antitype of all types.

With these ways in mind, if someone is studying a passage and is struggling to identify a way in which that portion of Scripture relates to the gospel, it is possible the problem is that the person is looking at the passage with too narrow of a focus. Zooming

¹⁸ DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament*, 481.

¹⁹ DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament*, 481.

²⁰ See DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament*, 482-89 for details on each way to proclaim Christ.

out from the details of the text may help provide a different framework, such as a theme in the broader context or from an analogous passage in the New Testament.

When studying a passage in a difficult book of the Bible, such as Ezekiel or Jeremiah, books that are overwhelmingly about the judgment that God brings on sin, an appropriate connection to the gospel is that we, too, deserve the unmitigated wrath of God, but it is averted in Christ's atonement. Similarly, the obedience that a passage demands is only available to those who depend on the grace of Christ available to believers because of his resurrection. Only when Christians have been glorified and are in the presence of God in the New Jerusalem will they no longer face the effects of the curse and the temptation to sin.

Bryan Chapell has sought to make these hermeneutical principles especially clear in the context of preaching. Whereas some may seek to find some reference to the cross or the blood of Jesus in every passage, Chapell contends, "A message is Christ-centered not because it makes creative mention of an aspect of Jesus' life or death but because it discloses an aspect of God's redeeming nature (evident in the text) that is ultimately understood, fulfilled, and/or accomplished in Christ."²¹ He acknowledges that "vast portions [of the Bible] make no mention" of Christ, but the way we see all of Scripture "center on Christ's work" is by "learning to see all of God's Word as a unified message of human need and divine provision."²²

Chapell contends that "the entire Bible is Christ-centered because his redemptive work . . . is the capstone of all of God's revelation of his dealings with his people. Thus, no aspect of revelation can be thoroughly understood or explained in isolation from some aspect of Christ's redeeming work."²³

²¹ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 15.

²² Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 20.

²³ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 276.

The point of Luke 24:13-35 is that Christians do not interpret the Bible rightly if they do not identify how a particular passage exposes the need for Christ, predicts or describes the work of Christ, or extols the results of the work of Christ. Chapell emphasizes, “*Christ-centered preaching rightly understood does not seek to discover where Christ is mentioned in every text but to disclose where every text stands in relation to Christ.*”²⁴ To avoid grievous errors in understanding a passage, Christians must exert effort to identify legitimate ways the passage proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Book of Acts: Examples of the Apostles Demonstrating Christ-Centered Reading of the Scriptures

How did the apostles respond to the teaching of Jesus in Luke 24? Did they get the message? And ultimately, how would readers know if they did? Simply, by the way the apostles wrote, and by the way they preached.

The book of Acts provides ample evidence that indeed the apostles got the message loud and clear, and then they went on to teach others to read the Bible the same way. The apostles grasped Jesus’s teaching and sought to compel their readers and hearers to see that Jesus is the center of Old Testament revelation.

At least three characters in the story of Acts reflect that Jesus’s thesis in Luke 24 was clearly grasped: Peter, Paul, and Apollos. The following section demonstrates how those three preachers incorporated their understanding of the Old Testament into their teaching and preaching opportunities to convince their hearers that Jesus is the one their Bible (the Old Testament) was anticipating.

²⁴ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 279, emphasis original.

Acts 2:14-36: The Arrival of the Spirit Proves That Jesus Is the Messiah

The Day of Pentecost was one of the most significant events in human history. It marked the beginning of a new era in which the hints that the Kingdom of God was being restored now give way to clear, full-forced bursts of Kingdom life. The promise of Jesus that God would send a “Helper” (John 14:26) came into fulfillment. Peter recognized that what was happening that day in Jerusalem was also “what was uttered through the prophet Joel” (2:16). Through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, God’s people were now themselves temples (1 Cor 6:19). In one moment of Spirit-wrought power, everything changed for God’s people.

The apostle Peter responded to the comments and confusion in the crowd that day by preaching the first recorded sermon in the book of Acts. Peter’s sermon is naturally divided into three sections, separated by the three terms with which he directly addresses his audience: “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem” (v. 14); “Men of Israel” (v. 22); and “Brothers” (v. 29). In the first section, Peter denies the suggestion that those speaking in foreign languages were drunk (v. 13), and explains that what was happening was fulfilling the prophecy of Joel. He quotes an extended portion of Joel 2:28-32. Not every detail of Joel’s prophesy was fulfilled in the events at Pentecost. Rather, Pentecost was in a sense the first-fruits of that passage being fulfilled. As Brian Vickers asserts, “Joel’s apocalyptic vision is not localized but final and all-encompassing as God’s ultimate judgment falls on the world. . . . This [the events of v. 19-20] is a scene of ultimate finality, the end of what began at Pentecost.”²⁵ But mercifully, those who respond to the powerful outworking of God’s plan in repentant faith, by calling on “the name of the Lord,” will be rescued in God-glorifying salvation (v. 21).

²⁵ Brian J. Vickers, *The Acts of the Apostles*, in *ESV Expository Commentary*, vol. 9, *John-Acts*, ed. Ian M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton, Jr., and Jay Sklar (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 358.

The second unit of the sermon observes that Jesus had been killed by “lawless men” (v. 23), but that God had raised him from the dead—an act that Peter observes was in direct fulfillment of Psalm 16:8-11. Peter’s use of Psalm 16 is significant. As Vickers aptly states, “Psalm 16 is not simply a handy example but according to Peter was pointing all along to the recent events.”²⁶ Peter goes to great lengths to demonstrate that David was not and could not have been talking about himself when he wrote Psalm 16. Rather, he was looking ahead to a future fulfillment by the Messianic King. When Jesus rose from the dead in the power of God, David’s prophetic Psalm was fulfilled.

Finally, the sermon’s third unit consists of Peter explaining why he interprets Psalm 16 the way he does. In doing so, he also quotes Psalm 110:1 to prove that “God has made [Jesus] both Lord and Christ.” The flow of Peter’s thought is as follows: the Spirit came because Jesus had died, was resurrected, and ascended to heaven. The fact the Spirit came proves that Jesus was the Messiah. If the Spirit had not come (in fulfillment of Joel 2), there would be good reason to doubt that Jesus was the Messiah. But since the Spirit had come, Peter’s audience must take that as evidence that Jesus truly is God’s Anointed One, and should respond in repentant faith.

Acts 3:11-26: Peter’s Sermon in Solomon’s Portico

In this passage in Acts 3, Peter gave his audience the unvarnished truth, and used the miracle he performed to show people that their only hope was in the God who can work miracles. From what Peter said after performing a miracle of healing, one could say that Peter had grasped the message of Jesus’s own words in Luke 24. He used that thorough understanding of the Bible to demonstrate the power and glory of Jesus.

In the first ten verses of Acts 3, Peter and John interact with a man outside the temple who was lame from birth and was begging for money. Instead of meeting that

²⁶ Vickers, *Acts of the Apostles*, 359.

temporal need, Peter acknowledges that he did not have what the man was asking for. Instead, he states that he could offer something that the man was surely not expecting. In verse 6, Peter famously says, “I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!”

The man was immediately healed and walked around rejoicing in this truly amazing gift. All those who saw him that day were astonished at this miracle. But Peter did not perform this wonder for that man’s benefit alone. He was eager to use the opportunity to address the crowd, give an overview of God’s history with his people, and call sinners to repentance.

The message he preached (3:11-26). In verses 11 through the end of the chapter, Peter summarizes Israel’s history as a means of evangelizing the unbelievers who were there that day. The content of his sermon demonstrated how deeply ingrained the message of the Bible was in his mind. He did not have simply a few verses memorized and a chart in his pocket to help him tell sinners how to “accept Jesus into their hearts.” Rather, Peter had a thorough understanding of how the whole Bible held together with Jesus at its center and God’s glory as its end.

In verse 12, Peter wonders why his audience was surprised, and why they assumed that it was in their own power that he and John healed the lame beggar. In verse 13, he takes his Jewish audience back to the book of Genesis, and says that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the one responsible for this miraculous healing, as he is the one who “glorified his servant Jesus.”²⁷

Peter then puts the responsibility for Jesus’s death on the hands of these Jewish people. In verse 13, he says they handed him over, disowned, and denied the one who

²⁷ Bruce draws a clear connection between Jesus’s glorification and the apostles’ miracle: “The cripple had been healed because Jesus had been glorified. From His place of exaltation He had endowed His disciples with power to act in His name, and to perform mighty works such as He had performed in the days of His bodily presence among them.” F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 88.

was Holy and Righteous, and “asked for a murderer” in his place. He was “the Author of life” (v. 15), killed by sinful men, but raised from the dead by God himself.

In those few verses alone, Peter lays out the facts of the gospel message. He identified who Jesus was, and no one there that day would have denied the historical facts that Peter listed. They were commonly known facts, so that only a fool would have argued with Peter about whether the events he recounted were true. They had seen them with their own eyes; they had participated in killing Jesus themselves.²⁸

The credit for the miraculous healing should only go to Jesus, Peter states in verse 16. Only faith with him as the object can have that kind of effect.²⁹ In verse 17, Peter for the second time calls his audience “brothers,” or fellow Israelites (cf. v. 12). In doing so, he is showing them that he is not against them, but that he is eager for their spiritual well-being. He acknowledges that what they did to Jesus was done “in ignorance,” by assuming that Jesus was a lunatic rather than Lord.³⁰

The mystery of the gospel, Peter insists, is that through the sinful acts of rebellious and spiritually blind people, God’s eternal purpose was accomplished. All that God had foretold through the Old Testament prophets, which in Peter’s mind were from Joshua through the Book of the Twelve, was fulfilled when Jesus suffered in his final days (v. 18).³¹ What sinful men had meant for evil, God had meant for good, and the

²⁸ As Bock elaborates, “It was the Jerusalem Jews’ corporate act that prevented Pilate from releasing Jesus (see Acts 4:27). Thus here we have an elaboration on the charge against the Jewish audience in 2:22-23. The Jewish leaders may have started the process, but the crowd approved it.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 170.

²⁹ Readers may note that the passage does not actually describe the man as having faith. Marshall gives a plausible explanation: “We are not told in the story that the man displayed faith, but the way in which he praised God after his cure could well imply this; alternatively, the faith might be that of Peter. In any case, any suggestion that there was something magical about the miracle is deliberately ruled out.” I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1980), 98.

³⁰ The “lunatic” language is based on C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 52.

³¹ In discussing which prophets Peter may have had in mind, Marshall comments, “we should probably think primarily of the teaching about the suffering of God’s Servant (Isa. 53), and also of other passages in the prophets and the Psalms which may have been taken as typological or prophetic of the

death of Jesus did nothing to interfere with God's divine plan of redemption. Rather, it furthered God's plan.

In verse 19, Peter immediately calls the men and women in his audience to turn to God in repentance.³² The result of such a turn will be that their sins would be "blotted out," they would receive "times of refreshing" from the Lord, and he would return. At that time God will restore all things (v. 21). Peter again invokes the Old Testament prophets, who spoke often of the Day of the Lord and the rich blessings of seeing the New Creation take full effect.

Peter's brief allusions to the prophets in verse 18 and in verse 21 demonstrate his foundation of biblical literacy. Once again, he was not merely quoting a prearranged list of data. He was composing, on the spot, a masterful summary of the teaching of the entire Bible. By maintaining a comprehensively biblical worldview, he knew where the world began (Gen 1-2), and where the world would end (Rev 21-22). He knew that it all centered on the person of Jesus for the glory of God. He knew that history was aiming at the full restoration of God's beautiful creation. And he was zealous in his evangelism for his fellow Israelites, and in his appeal that sinners would turn to God for the refreshing grace of Jesus, because he was so fully convinced of the Bible's teaching. His biblical literacy convinced him that all of God's promises to his people were coming to pass in Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Cor 1:20).

In vv. 22 and 23, Peter recounts Moses saying (in Deut 18) that God will provide another prophet like himself. He goes one step further, showing that "anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from their people," an allusion to

sufferings of the Messiah (Jer. 11:19; Dan. 9:26; Zech. 13:7; Pss. 22, 69); this would give us material from three of the four books of the 'latter prophets' (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the book of the Twelve; omitting Ezekiel) and also from the Psalms." Marshall, *Acts*, 99.

³² The forgiving mercy of God is apparent in Peter's application, that these sinners can be saved despite "their acquiescence in the murder of their true Messiah. . . . Their sins would be wiped out, even that sin of sins which they had unwittingly committed in clamouring for the death of the Author of life. Here, surely, is the heart of the gospel of grace." Bruce, *Acts*, 90.

Leviticus 23:29. Peter understood that to be “cut off” from the people of God is to be eternally separated from God. As Bock describes, “The remark warns of total judgment for failing to respond to the person and work of Jesus, who is *the* prophet like Moses. Peter declares that those who fail to respond will have no place among God’s people.”³³ This is true both for Jew (in Peter’s original audience) and Gentile, as together in the church they constitute the true people of God.

As his sermon continues Peter alludes to the books of Samuel, and to Samuel himself, as part of the prophetic witness that have spoken of what are now the last days. He sees the promises to Abraham in Genesis 12 fulfilled in Jesus, who by his work on the cross brings the blessings of salvation to all nations.

Summarizing Peter’s sermon. In the span of what takes less than five minutes to read aloud, Peter concisely stated the message of the entire Old Testament. Granted, what Luke recorded in Acts 3 may have been a summary of a much larger sermon on Peter’s part.³⁴ But regardless of whether that is the case or not, the point is the same: Peter knew his Bible, and he knew it very well. He could maneuver from any one point in the Old Testament to any other point while demonstrating that the message of the Bible is all about God receiving glory in saving his people and judging his enemies, all of which is accomplished through the person and work of Jesus.³⁵

³³ Bock, *Acts*, 179.

³⁴ Walter L. Liefeld addresses this possibility indirectly: “We can affirm that there is a normal tendency to preserve elements that express one’s special concerns. This is an aspect of redaction criticism that few would deny. As with the Gospels, we should not be surprised if an author chooses to preserve from his sources data that contain especially appropriate components. Such selection hardly implies that the concert of these sources is unreliable or historically inaccurate.” Walter L. Liefeld, *Interpreting the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 66-67.

³⁵ Describing the content of Peter’s entire sermon, Bock summarizes, “Acts 3 preaches Jesus from the Torah. Here is the promised seed-servant-prophet-leader like Moses who is the Author of life.” Bock, *Acts*, 182. Peter preached this way because he saw that the whole Old Testament was about Jesus—because he was reading the Bible rightly. For an expansion on the theme of God’s glory as the center of the whole Bible, see James M. Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

Put simply, as demonstrated through the message of Peter, Christians become more confident sharing the gospel with unbelievers, and are more compelled to do so, when they know the story of the whole Bible well. They have more legitimate paths to the cross of Christ when they know the story well. They recognize that saying they “share the gospel” is simply another way of saying that they are telling the story of the Bible in a tightly packaged way. This is the responsibility and privilege of Christians, to be ambassadors of reconciliation (cf. 2 Cor 5:19-20); and these ambassadors are best equipped to help reconcile sinners to God when they are ever increasing in biblical literacy.

Acts 9:20-22

Acts 9 recounts the remarkable conversion story of Saul, a man who hated Jesus and all who followed him. Shortly after Saul was baptized, he spent time with disciples in Damascus and began preaching in the Jewish synagogues. What he did “confounded the Jews” (v. 22), raising questions about whether they were looking at the same man they had previously known.³⁶ The reason for this confusion is that the message he preached was completely antithetical to what he had been saying previously. His specific message was twofold: Jesus is the son of God, and Jesus is the Christ.

Jesus is the Son of God. In saying that Jesus is the son of God, Paul was not actually (or at least, only) making an explicit statement about the deity of Christ. The term “son of God” is frequently used in the Bible in a less-specific way. In Luke 3:38, Adam is called the son of God. In Exodus 4:23, the Lord tells Moses to tell Pharaoh, “Let

³⁶ As an example of the unity between the books of Luke and Acts, note that in recounting this detail, Luke uses markedly similar language to the reaction of the crowd when Jesus was preaching in a synagogue in Nazareth. At least three similarities exist, each of which are in italics: “And *all* spoke well of him and *marveled* at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, ‘*Is not this* Joseph’s son?’” (Luke 4:22). Compare that summary and question with Acts 9:21: “And *all* who heard him *were amazed* and said, ‘*Is not this* the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name?’”

my son go that he may serve me,” referring to the people of Israel. And in 1 Chronicles 28:6, the Lord says, “It is Solomon your son who shall build my house and my courts, for I have chosen him to be my son, and I will be his father.” In that way, Solomon was a son of God.

So what does Paul specifically mean when he is teaching here that Jesus is the Son of God? It is a shorthand way of saying that he is God’s chosen instrument to lead and serve his people, and to reveal the nature of God to his people. Bock agrees that the term “is probably meant in terms of full ‘sonship,’ given its outgrowth from Saul’s vision in seeing a glorified Jesus whom he had heard preached as the Son of Man at God’s right hand in Acts 7:56.” He elaborates further, though, that “the title also has a messianic thrust if 9:22 and the speech of chapter 13 are guides. . . . Jesus is preached as the unique promised one of God.”³⁷ In other words, the title “Son of God” in Paul’s synagogue preaching was intended to evoke Jewish understanding of the person uniquely given by God to lead his people. That being said, Paul was going one step further to help his readers see that Jesus was the ultimate, true Son of God.

Jesus is the Messiah. Verse 22 states that Paul proved that Jesus was the Christ. Simply put, Paul was helping his audience see that Jesus was the greatly anticipated Messiah, the one destined by God to save his people. Their expectation was that the Christ would triumph over their human enemies, those who oppressed the Jews. Jesus was concerned for his people on a far deeper level: he knew that their greatest problem was spiritual bondage to sin, and only his brutal death on the cross could accomplish all that they needed out of their long-awaited savior.

How did Paul convince his audience of this truth? Though Luke does not say this explicitly, readers should assume that Paul was drawing from his extensive and

³⁷ Bock, *Acts*, 365.

immense understanding of Old Testament Scriptures in every sermon he preached. As other sermons and his New Testament epistles attest, Paul had a comprehensive understanding of the Scriptures, and it makes sense to imagine that he was drawing from every part of his Bible to lay out the gospel message for his hearers. His biblical literacy was on full display.

Acts 13:16-41: Jesus Fulfills Old Testament Expectations

In the city of Antioch, in one of the longest speeches in the book of Acts, Paul takes an opportunity given to him by the rulers of the synagogue to give a “word of encouragement.” In response, Paul declares, quite simply, that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises given to Israel by God.

He begins by recounting the basics of Israel’s history: God chose Israel (v. 17a), causing them to be fruitful and multiply while in Egypt (v. 17b), and led them into the wilderness for forty years (v. 18). He then gave them their land (v. 19) before giving them judges (v. 20). Paul then recounts the major players of Israel’s history in the land. God gave them the prophet Samuel (v. 20), then when the people demanded a king, he gave them Saul (v. 21) and then David (v. 22). Paul alludes to the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7:14 (v. 23), and then fast-forwards to John the Baptist’s anticipation of the one who would come after him (vv. 24-25). Paul gives this bullet-point overview of the Old Testament era to make a singular statement: Jesus is the person we have been waiting for all these years.

But the people of Israel had not realized that reality. As a result, they fulfilled “the utterances of the prophets” by putting Jesus to death (v. 27). Thankfully, that was not the end of the story. Paul recounts that “the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us . . . by raising Jesus” (vv. 32-33). Paul is intent to demonstrate that the resurrection was not merely a historical fact; it was also a promise fulfilled. He argues that the resurrection fulfills the expectation of Psalm 2:7, that the Son

is “begotten” of the Father. As Vickers summarizes, “The discussion concerning Jesus’ being ‘begotten’ is complex, but the basic idea here involves God the Father’s raising Jesus from the dead, making him the ‘firstborn of the dead’ (Rev 1:5).”³⁸

The Old Testament passages Paul uses to highlight the work of God are all significant. He weaves together three load-bearing passages to demonstrate that Jesus is at the heart of Old Testament revelation. In the first, Psalm 2:7, God says to the Son, “Today I have begotten you.” In the second, he is saying that by resurrecting Jesus, God is fulfilling Isaiah 55:3 by fulfilling in Jesus “the holy and sure blessings of David.” In doing so, he fulfills Psalm 16:10, in which he promises that his “Holy One” will not “see corruption.” Paul is quick to note that David was clearly not writing of himself, since he indeed “saw corruption” (v. 36).

A response of repentant faith was the aim of Paul’s sermon. Faith in this crucified and risen Savior provides forgiveness of sins (v. 38) and freedom from the demands of the law (v. 39). In this sermon, the gospel is defined as the good news that God keeps his promises to give his people Israel a Savior, who would defy death and provide liberty to all who believe in him. That promised hope comes from every part of the Old Testament, and that hope climaxes in the person of the resurrected Jesus.

Acts 17:2-3: Reasoning, Explaining, and Proving

Paul and his co-laborer Silas were traveling to various regions of the world to proclaim the gospel of Jesus. After leaving Philippi (the focus of the latter part of Acts 16), Paul and Silas arrived in Thessalonica. Luke uses a variety of terms in verses 2 and 3 to describe Paul’s ministry in the Jewish synagogue in that city. The basic gist of his summary is that Paul was building a case, as he is known to do in his epistles. His

³⁸ Vickers, *Acts of the Apostles*, 464.

argument was specifically that the Old Testament expected the Messiah to fulfill a specific responsibility: he must suffer and die, and then he must rise from the dead.

While Luke does not say what scriptures Paul used, he does describe *what* Paul was arguing. Paul is making it clear that the Old Testament portrays the Christ as being one who would suffer and would rise from the dead. Paul made his message brilliantly clear for his hearers in that synagogue, as he did in Damascus in Acts 9: Jesus is that highly-anticipated person; he is the Messiah.

Acts 18:24-28: Apollos Was Persuaded That Jesus Was the Christ

Few people in the Bible are referred to as being skilled with the Scriptures. That makes what Acts 18:24 describes about Apollos particularly noteworthy: “He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures.” A possible comparison is Ezra 7:6, which states that Ezra “was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses.” But the fact that Luke referred to Apollos with such a compliment is striking. Apollos is indeed “one of the more remarkable characters of the NT.”³⁹

The other comment Luke makes about Apollos that is important in this context is that he was able to argue effectively with the Jews about who Jesus was. Verse 28 says that Apollos “powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.” The alternative to “showing by the Scriptures” was for Apollos to use human reasoning or emotional appeal. Luke records neither of those options. Instead, Apollos used his eloquence and competence in the Word to show a skeptical audience that the Messiah, whose coming the Jews were still mistakenly anticipating, was actually Jesus himself.

As in previous passages, Luke did not take the time to identify which Old Testament passages Apollos used in his appeal to the Jews. It seems possible that the

³⁹ Vickers, *Acts of the Apostles*, 512.

reason for Luke’s editorial decision is that he anticipated that his readers would have been familiar with the major passages Apollos would have used, and thus he would have felt redundant. In other words, by stating that Apollos was skilled in biblical literacy (“competent in the Scriptures”), he was implying that his readers should be as well.

Acts 24:14: Paul Is Persuaded of a Future Resurrection

In Acts 24, Paul is defending himself before Felix, who already had a reasonable understanding of Christianity (v. 22). Paul’s basic claim, however, is that “there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.” Paul believes that day is coming because of “everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets” (v. 14). Simply put, the Old Testament anticipates and prophesies that everyone will give account before God, and Paul understands that such a judgment will be carried out specifically by Jesus. He is appealing to the Law and the Prophets as a means of showing that he is not believing anything new, and therefore it is not the heretical sect that his accusers assume.⁴⁰

Acts 28:23-24: Paul Aims to Convince

Once again, Paul’s profound emphasis on showing the continuity between the Old Testament Scriptures and the ministry of Jesus is obvious. He knew that the surest way to convince people to follow Jesus was to demonstrate that Moses and the prophets were consistently anticipating Jesus himself in their writings. Thus he was “trying to convince” his hearers, and indeed some were convinced (v. 24). He was preaching the kingdom of God.

⁴⁰ Rightly Bock, alluding to Roloff: “The ‘new’ movement is actually rooted in old promises It should be respected as an appropriate reflection of Jewish hope. It is no subversive movement.” Bock, *Acts*, 692.

Conclusion

Biblical literacy develops most productively when Christians read Scripture frequently and faithfully. Faithful Bible reading is characterized by more than simply a pattern of regular Bible reading, as critical as that habit is. Growing in biblical literacy involves reading the Bible the way Jesus showed the apostles how to interpret and understand the Bible. Those apostles then went and proclaimed the message of Christ abroad, and in doing so, also showed that they had been instructed in understanding and applying the Bible by the Master himself.

For Christians eager to read, understand, and apply the Bible rightly, the message that the person and work of Jesus is at the center of the entire Bible is crucially important. The skill of biblical literacy develops only over time and through strenuous effort. When following the interpretive example of Jesus and the apostles, however, Christians are then able to learn to read the Bible from the most authoritative and reliable teachers themselves.

CHAPTER 3

THE ROLE OF HABITS IN DEVELOPING BIBLICAL LITERACY

Reading the Bible with understanding and accuracy is difficult for practical reasons, such as the obvious reality of how large of a book it is. It is also difficult to read well for theological reasons—the human heart is deceived by sin and blinded by the spiritual enemy. But an additional challenge is that in the age in which Christians live today, digital distractions are always lurking.

This reality proves to make reading the Bible and growing in biblical literacy very difficult. But Bible readers must not wait for a day when distractions are more limited, or pine for the days when distractions were fewer. They must live in the here and now and learn to read the Bible well in this distracting environment. Theologian David Wells acknowledges this difficulty: “We are never free of ourselves. And in ourselves we carry the sights, sounds, and struggles of the world we have known and, perhaps, tried to leave behind. For us today, that means this highly pressurized world of constant overstimulation, constant demands, and unceasing distraction.”¹ Readers will always have to struggle to concentrate. This struggle will affect Bible readers as much as nearly anyone. To grow in biblical literacy, then, Christians must develop habits that lead to a disciplined life.

One aspect of habits Christians need to consider is learning to fight and remove bad habits that are the fruit of digital distraction. (Of course, other unrelated distractions certainly exist that affect good Bible reading, such as living with other people, especially

¹ David F. Wells, *God in the Whirlwind: How the Holy-love of God Reorients Our World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 37.

young children, and the pressure of work deadlines.) Besides fighting those bad habits, Christians must replace them with good thinking and reading habits, enabling them to think cogently and concentrate for reasonable periods of time. And finally, Christians must invest the effort to become better readers of the Bible specifically.

Christians Must Actively Fight against the Nemesis of Digital Distraction

Opportunities to be distracted have existed throughout history, but the challenge is seemingly only escalating. Conservative author Rod Dreher notes this reality and its effect on modern-day discipleship. He writes about “what a massive challenge technology is to authentic Christian living in the twenty-first century.” He elaborates, “Online technology, in its various forms, is a phenomenon that by its very nature fragments and scatters our attention like nothing else, radically compromising our ability to make sense of the world, physiologically rewiring our brains and rendering us increasingly helpless against our impulses.”²

Digital Distraction Affects the Ability to Think Deeply

Secular author Nicholas Carr noted this same problem in his New York Times-bestselling book a decade ago. He did not want to believe that the internet could actually be affecting the way his brain processed information. “It seemed ludicrous,” he writes, “that fiddling with a computer, a mere tool, could alter in any deep or lasting way what was going on inside my head. But I was wrong.”³ His book masterfully details the unintended consequences of living in an internet-saturated society.

² Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians In a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017), 219.

³ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: Norton, 2010), 38.

What web-browsers did to the brain in the days when the only way to access the internet was through a desktop or laptop computer has only been amplified now that most Americans carry a computer in their pocket in the form of a smartphone. Journalist Tony Reinke has contributed to this concept in several important and accessible books. In a resource devoted to the immense power of smartphones to change people, Reinke observes that the way Christians use their phones today will have reverberating effects not only on their own hearts but for generations to come. He notes that “true distractions include anything (even a good thing) that veils our spiritual eyes from the shortness of time and from the urgency of the season of heightened expectation as we await the summing up of all history.”⁴ The power of distracting influences on the spiritual heart of individuals makes managing these distractions a vital component of Christian discipleship. Reinke calls this management a “critical skill,” lest Christians “lose our hearts by the erosive power of unchecked amusements.”⁵ Elsewhere he acknowledges that far from being something humans naturally hate, “we like distraction. We want distraction. Distraction is how we stay busy enough to avoid the self-discipline required to read books.”⁶

Digital Distraction Promotes Thinking About Shallow Subjects

Digital distraction has many effects, not the least of which is that it keeps individuals from focusing on what is important. Most social media, as an easy target, is typically occupied with what is fleeting rather than lasting, and what is humorous rather than what is serious. What percentage of Facebook posts or TikTok videos encourages individuals to think about the brevity of life and the importance of contributing to society

⁴ Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 49.

⁵ Reinke, *12 Ways*, 51.

⁶ Tony Reinke, *Lit! A Christian Guide to Reading Books* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 141.

and the lives of loved ones while they have the opportunity? Matthew McCullough, a pastor in Nashville, describes in a book on the nearness of death the moment when he realized he could not remember the name of his own great-grandfather—surely someone more important to him than an unknown entity he only engages from a distance on the internet. He recognizes that no matter what he accomplishes in his life, his own progeny “won’t even know my name. I won’t be remembered by my own descendants in one hundred years.”⁷ But this reflection is lost on most people spending hours on media content they will probably not remember even in the next week.

No one wants to be left out of a conversation happening right in front of them, and digital distraction often appeals to the human desire to not be left out of what is going on even at a distance. Some refer to this phenomenon as the “fear of missing out.” Nebraska Senator Ben Sasse addresses the challenge this problem raises: “Our culture’s ever-present distractions—the obsessive appeals to immediacy (“What ‘news’ might I be missing?”)—conspire to blunt our curiosity and distract us from sustained thought.”⁸ Tony Reinke wrote an entire chapter on the numerous forms of this fear and the way it affects people in a variety of ways. When even the slightest hint of boredom or discomfort arises, “we instinctively grab our phones to medicate the pain with affirmation.”⁹

Digital Distraction Leads to Excessive Time-Wasting

What does all this discussion have to do with reading the Bible and becoming biblically literate? The connection should be clear: the bells and whistles of a

⁷ Matthew McCullough, *Remember Death: The Surprising Path to Living Hope* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 62.

⁸ Ben Sasse, *The Vanishing American Adult: Our Coming-of-Age Crisis—and How to Rebuild a Culture of Self-Reliance* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2017), 210.

⁹ Reinke, *12 Ways*, 156.

smartphone, tablet, television, or other digital device lure attention from weighty matters of life to ephemeral matters that are mostly inconsequential, short-term, and made to be forgotten. God’s word is not matched with any of those descriptors. Human hearts are made for eternity (Eccl 3:11). Swimming in the shallow waters of digital distractions only numbs Christians to the ability to feel all that God intends or to respond as he requires, with faith, repentance, and worship. It leads to wasting time rather than redeeming it. Author Tony Reinke admits, “In the little cracks of time in my day, with my limited attention, I am more apt to check or feed social media than I am to pray. Because of my negligence, God grows increasingly distant from my life. . . . The worst of our social media habits are filling our days and corroding our prayer lives.”¹⁰

The sin of excessive time-wasting should be a matter that weighs heavily on the Christian’s conscience. While the Bible itself may not discuss the negative effects of the use of smartphones or habitually spending hours on YouTube, truth outside the Bible is also important for having a well-regulated conscience.¹¹ Some of this truth includes the intentionally-addictive nature of social media.

Awareness of the dangers of being distracted by digital devices is an important first step. Once aware of this reality, however, Christians must go to great lengths to replace bad habits with good ones that not only mitigate being distracted, but then make Bible reading (and thereby developing biblical literacy) far better and more fruitful.

Christians Must Develop Habits That Lead to Clear and Sustained Thinking

Humans are creatures of habit by design, and mercifully so. Imagine the daily fatigue of having to relearn how to tie shoes or brew a pot of coffee. On a far more

¹⁰ Tony Reinke, *Competing Spectacles: Treasuring Christ in the Media Age* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 67-68.

¹¹ Andrew David Naselli and J. D. Crowley have a very helpful discussion on how to “calibrate your conscience by educating your conscience with truth” (81) in *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016). See especially pp. 55-83.

significant level, God created humans with the capacity to create habits that help make them good citizens and disciples.

Identify and Begin to Fight Bad Habits That Stunt Sustained Thinking

It is impossible to address a bad habit without being aware that it exists in the first place. Someone may desire to lose weight but is not aware that he instinctively snacks while sitting at his desk. In a similar way, people use their phone while sitting in the car or while waiting in line without being aware of just how many times they let their phone keep them from a sustained thought. The first step in gaining back the ground lost to distraction is for a person to become aware of times and places where he or she routinely (and perhaps almost unconsciously) turns to a digital distraction for relief. One of the important factors in forming habits is a neurotransmitter called dopamine.¹² Whether they admit it or not, technology giants such as YouTube and Facebook likely look to capitalize on the inherently addictive nature of their technologies through dopamine-driven feedback loops.¹³ Author Cal Newport exposes that “in many cases these addictive properties of new technologies are not accidents, but instead carefully engineered design features.”¹⁴ Using technologies such as social media apps can be akin

¹² Author James Clear discusses the dopamine-driven feedback loop at some length in his book *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones* (New York: Avery, 2018), 105-8. Clear notes that, “When it comes to habits, the key takeaway is this: dopamine is released not only when you *experience* pleasure, but also when you *anticipate* it. Gambling addicts have a dopamine spike right *before* they place a bet, not after they win. Cocaine addicts get a surge of dopamine when they *see* the powder, not after they take it” (106). Readers may experience this sensation when talking to a friend and they feel the buzz of their cell phone alerting them that they have received a text message. Before even seeing who the message is from, their mind feels a sense of excitement and desire to read the message. This momentary shot of dopamine is often enough to distract the mind from the person in front of them and lose track of what they were discussing.

¹³ To be fair, when testifying before Congress in 2018, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg denied seeking to make his online social platform addictive. Dan Boylan, “Zuckerberg Denies Consulting ‘Dopamine Feedback Loop’ Experts to Make Facebook Addictive,” *The Washington Post*, April 10, 2018, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/apr/10/zuckerberg-denies-consulting-dopamine-feedback-loop/>.

¹⁴ Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2019), 16-17.

to pulling the slot machine at a casino. When posting something on Facebook or Twitter, for instance, “the outcome is hard to predict, which, as the psychology of addiction teaches us, makes the whole activity of posting and checking [to see what feedback other users have given] maddeningly appealing.”¹⁵

Certainly other companies have learned that cravings drive habits. Author Charles Duhigg writes, “Every night, millions of people scrub their teeth in order to get a tingling feeling; every morning, millions put on their jogging shoes to capture an endorphin rush they’ve learned to crave.”¹⁶ These cravings are what drive advertisement campaigns and even tweaks to common products. Duhigg relates how toothpaste companies learned to tap into the desire of customers to have “a cool, tingling sensation on the tongue and gums.” Though toothpastes initially did not have ingredients that gave that sensation, once people came to expect that feeling, they were not satisfied until they got it. “Once people craved that cool tingling,” Duhigg writes, “once they equated it with cleanliness—brushing became a habit.”¹⁷ Individuals who learn to identify what they crave are far more likely to change their bad habits successfully and replace them with good ones.

US Senator Ben Sasse has written two books in the past several years, each of which deals to some extent with the need to develop good reading habits and to fight distractions. He notes that “Americans are increasingly tempted to buy into the idea that more tech saturation is a cost-free escape from the boredom and inconveniences of life.”¹⁸ This desire to escape from boredom is obvious when in an elevator, standing in a line at Starbucks or a grocery store, sitting in a traffic jam or in a doctor’s office, or even

¹⁵ Newport, *Digital Minimalism*, 18.

¹⁶ Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* (New York: Random House, 2012), 59.

¹⁷ Duhigg, *Power of Habit*, 57.

¹⁸ Ben Sasse, *Them: Why We Hate Each Other—and How to Heal* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2018), 167.

walking down a busy sidewalk. Notice in these circumstances how few people are mentally present in the moment. Most people, rather, are staring at their phones, bored and unwilling to engage people around them in conversations. Of course, this pattern makes evangelism all the more challenging for faithful Christians—if someone doesn't like what you are saying, all he has to do is look at his phone to send the unmistakable signal that he is not interested in the conversation.¹⁹

Not everyone, of course, faces the same challenges with habits and particularly with habitual use of technology. Some people need to be especially selective in how they dole out their time for leisure, such as playing video games or watching streaming shows; others may not need to concern themselves with how much they spend time this way because it does not hold them powerfully the way it does for some.

Of course, in the good desire to eliminate digital distraction and habits that prohibit growing in biblical literacy, some Christians may begin to view every digital device or technological advancement with suspicion. This would be an unfortunate and unnecessary mistake. Though in context theologian Joe Rigney is writing specifically about the proper use of money, he wisely distinguishes between those who are overly wary (of, say, technology) and others who are overly lax in their use of God's good gifts.

Not everyone needs to hear the same encouragement or exhortation or warning. Not everyone has the same temptations, inclinations, and proclivities. Some lean left and need to be pushed right. Some lean right and need to be pushed left. But if you push to the right, you may cause those who lean to the right to fall over. . . . Some people lean on the ascetic side and are highly attuned to the danger of worldliness, consumerism, and materialism. They are sensitive to the threat of Mammon worship to the point that they must be reminded that God's gifts are good and ought to be received gladly. Others treat the danger of greed and idolatry lightly and are far too comfortable with the worldliness around them. Luxuries and comforts easily become necessities of life, and they need to be reminded that Jesus calls us to follow him on the road *to the cross*.²⁰

¹⁹ This common phenomenon is the subject of Alan Noble, *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018).

²⁰ Joe Rigney, *The Things of Earth: Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gifts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 184-85.

Begin to Create Better, More Productive Habits That Lead to Clear Thinking

Replacing bad habits with good ones that lead to clear thinking over long periods of time will naturally make growing in biblical literacy easier and more desirable. Many of the habits Christians could create relate to the concept of simply letting the brain wander, even to the point of boredom. Sitting still and staring off in the distance is a valuable, forgotten skill.

Habitual actions do not just affect the person who does them. Christian adults need to be aware of the message they are sending to teenagers and especially children, who (through parental wisdom) may not yet have the same access to devices but who are watching and learning what is normal. Instead of modeling patterns of cell phone addiction, adults (particularly parents) can give the next generation a vision of the beauty of reading, writing, and concentrating.

Ben Sasse addresses the habits he has sought to instill in his children by urging them to prioritize reading books. This is important, he says, because “there are only so many hours in a day. This makes it essential that they become stewards of their limited time as they fall in love with reading particular books.”²¹ Professor Alan Jacobs acknowledges that “no matter how hard you try, you won’t be able to enjoy everything that is worthy of praise.” But that does not mean readers should give up. “Our goal as adults,” he continues, “is not to love all books alike, or as few as possible, but rather to love as widely and as well as our limited selves will allow.”²² In other words, readers should find books they enjoy, and read them. When a book does nothing to spark joy or imagination or growth, simply set it aside and read something else.

One habit that may significantly help Christians to fight the urge of being relentlessly connected online is to work to develop more meaningful relationships. Ben

²¹ Ben Sasse, *The Vanishing American Adult*, 210.

²² Alan Jacobs, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 134-35.

Sasse observes, “Social media companies promise new forms of community and unprecedented connectedness. But it turns out that at the same time that any Billy Bob in Boise can broadcast his opinions to thousands of people, we have fewer non-virtual friends than at any point in decades.”²³ This problem exposes itself on many levels, and few bright spots emerge when considering the data. But if Christian discipleship is best considered a group project rather than an individual sport, one can hardly overstate the importance of keeping Christians engaged with each other in flesh-and-blood relationships. This engagement often happens through face-to-face conversations, small group Bible studies, regularly reading and discussing books, and ministering to other individuals and families through hospitality.

In a world full of noise, silence is increasingly valuable. A habit that can help individuals slow down, reflect, and appreciate silence is keeping a journal with paper and pen. A further idea for learning to embrace silence rather than incessant noise is to leave the television off as a default unless actively watching, rather than having all the quiet moments of the day undercut by the flow of advertisements or adrenaline-boosting news flashes. Television, like most other technologies available today, is designed to draw in its viewers and not let them go. Describing the power of television to hold someone’s attention, Maggie Jackson observes, “its quick cuts and rapid imagery are designed to keep tugging at our natural inclination to orient toward the shiny, the bright, the mobile—whatever’s eye-catching in our environment.” She continues, “television is in essence an interruption machine, the most powerful attention slicer yet invented. Just step into the room with the enticing glow, and life changes.”²⁴ Jackson was writing just as the era of the smartphone was beginning to take root, so perhaps she would redefine what is “the most powerful attention slicer yet invented,” but the basic concept still applies.

²³ Sasse, *Them*, 28.

²⁴ Maggie Jackson, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2008), 72.

Driving a car or riding on other forms of transportation are natural times for the brain to focus. To take advantage of these opportunities, individuals can carry a small notebook. While at home, those eager to build thoughtful habits should consider minor tweaks to their lives like using a standard alarm clock rather than a cell phone, so that the phone does not even need to be in the bedroom. This habit allows time at the end of the day to let the mind wander off, and makes checking the phone right after waking up less likely. At other times of the day, leaving the phone in a different room, in a drawer, or on the other side of the room can make checking the phone compulsively for notifications less attractive. For those living with family, meals are natural times to talk, so leaving the television off and digital devices in another room fosters opportunities for building good habits.

The constant pings of digital devices shatter opportunities to concentrate. Georgetown University professor Cal Newport urges his readers not to run from boredom, but rather to embrace it. “Much in the same way that athletes must take care of their bodies outside of their training sessions, you’ll struggle to achieve the deepest levels of concentration if you spend the rest of your time fleeing the slightest hint of boredom.”²⁵ Newport goes on to reverse a common way of thinking about distraction and focus. “Don’t take breaks from distraction. Instead take breaks from focus.”²⁶

To move toward this level of focus, readers should consider turning off as many phone notifications as possible. Most smartphones have some kind of “do not disturb” feature, which at least gives the opportunity to enter deeper levels of concentration and sustained thought. Every quick glance at a smartphone interrupts an opportunity to think deeply, even if the subject is relatively unimportant. An undistracted thought is always to be preferred to being needlessly interrupted. Newport taps into the

²⁵ Cal Newport, *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* (New York: Grand Central, 2016), 157.

²⁶ Newport, *Deep Work*, 159.

concept that James Clear and Charles Duhigg describe, that “once you’re wired for distraction, you crave it. Motivated by this reality, this strategy [of scheduling times for distraction] is designed to help you rewire your brain to a configuration better suited to staying on task.”²⁷ He commends that individuals “schedule in advance when you’ll use the Internet, and then avoid it altogether outside these times.”²⁸

Another habit that can help people learn to focus is to attempt various projects by hand. Making progress on a home repair project, baking bread, and learning to play a musical instrument are all forms of a deeper leisure that diminish the appeal of social media or other mindless digital entertainment.²⁹ Simply put, it is better to create than to consume. It is better to move and exercise than to sit and stare at screens. It is better, at least at regular intervals, to enjoy silence rather than incessant noise.

Some may assume that this kind of sustained thinking in normal life is not possible, so instead they should plan a retreat. Wells counters, “Brief retreats are helpful, but our lives cannot be on an unending retreat. It is in *this* world, not somewhere else, that we must learn to be God-centered in our thoughts and God-honoring in our lives.”³⁰

Christians Must Actively Work to Develop Habits of Sound Bible Reading

Christians must learn to read the Bible regularly, knowledgably, and productively. That statement summarizes the basic thrust of this entire project.

Some Christians are more comfortable than others in navigating through the Bible. Perhaps they have read the Bible their entire life because they grew up in a

²⁷ Newport, *Deep Work*, 160.

²⁸ Newport, *Deep Work*, 161. Though James K. A. Smith does not address that specific habit, the role of habits in creating spiritual rhythms toward holistic Christian discipleship is the theme of his book *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016).

²⁹ Several authors write at length on this concept. See, for example, Newport, *Digital Minimalism*, 165-212; Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 71-81.

³⁰ Wells, *God in the Whirlwind*, 37.

Christian family, or they have read books about it, or even taken classes about it in college.

Psalm 119:18 states that when Christians read the Bible, they are setting their eyes on “wondrous things.” That means, at the very least, that Christians should carefully contemplate what the Bible says—they must exert significant time and energy into seeing the “wondrous things” that the Bible holds. What wondrous things does it communicate? It tells the story of who God is, what he is like, what he has done, is doing, and will do, and how people inhabit that story. It answers the big questions of life—where people came from, why they exist, and where they are going. It explains that humans can live for the fame and glory of God, and tells how they do that in specific, practical ways.

In other words, the Bible itself says that Christians should care deeply about the Bible. It describes why the world has the problems it has, but it also describes the solution to those problems. That solution is full-orbed salvation provided through the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Bible explains that when redemption is complete, his people will live in God’s kingdom, forever free from the problems of this fallen world. In summary, the Bible is a gracious gift from God and deserves a Christian’s deepest efforts to read it regularly and accurately.

This section attempts to provide practical suggestions for the actual act of reading the Bible. As with the skills of playing a musical instrument or decorating wedding cakes, reading the Bible is both an art and a science. Most Christians, though, probably need to focus on the science of Bible reading more than the art.

Keep in mind, Christians do not read the Bible as a good luck charm. Instead, like prayer and fellowship with the church body, this is a habit of grace—this habit is not about having a good day spiritually, but about rejoicing in God’s grace and drinking in his grace more deeply.

Suggestions for Pre-Bible Reading

Even before opening the Bible, various habits can help make the exercise of Bible reading more fruitful.

Read on a schedule. Rather than having to decide every day where to read, the alternative is to find one of the many good Bible reading plans available. Readers know their own daily life better than anyone else, so some Christians might read heavy amounts on the weekends (say, read all of Hebrews over the weekend—half on Saturday morning and half on Sunday afternoon) and just slowly read through the Proverbs during the week.

Use a paper copy of the Bible. Tablets and phones can have Bibles on them, of course. But the problem is whatever else is on them—a calendar, reminders, text messages, the Internet, or pictures of a recent fun outing. None of those are bad, but they all can be distracting, and human brains love distractions. That leads to a larger point, but certainly related.

Remove every distraction possible. At the very least, readers who turn their phone to “do not disturb” and put the phone out of sight are in a far better position to read successfully. Perhaps even better would be for readers to put their phone in a drawer in a separate room so it would take effort to get it. Close the computer, turn off the TV and radio, put your phone away—and *then* read the Bible.

Mark the Bible. One of the reasons to use a paper Bible is to have the ability to write in it. Many people are hesitant to write in their Bibles or mark them, but someone can always go buy another fresh copy of the Bible. A variety of colored pencils, for instance, can be exceedingly helpful. Someone could mark an aspect of the character of God in a particular color, and God’s promises in another color. Use one color to mark everything that quotes or obviously alludes to earlier Scripture, drawing attention to how

often the Old Testament quotes other Old Testament passages. Of course, the New Testament does that as well. The book of Revelation alone alludes to the Old Testament hundreds of times.

Read with a friend. Someone could understand that suggestion in two different ways, and both have value. First, read on a set schedule with a friend, so that each person can hold the other accountable. Second, literally read with a friend. Friends could meet over coffee in a restaurant or in a home, and then take turns reading aloud. This practice can go a long way in increasing Bible comprehension, if for no other reason that the friends can discuss what they are reading along the way.³¹

Suggestions for Bible Reading

After sitting down and opening the Bible, what will make Bible reading more productive, leading to the goal of greater biblical literacy? Here are some suggestions to help readers make the most of their Bible intake.

Pray for spiritual understanding. Christians can pray that the Lord would open their eyes to behold truth about God, about himself (as a sinner prone to wander), about the world Christians inhabit, and about what God is doing in the world. They can pray that God would reveal himself through his word, bringing both conviction and delight.

Listen to an audio Bible. Many people struggle to read, which is no cause for shame. In that case, listening to some of the outstanding audio resources available today can be immensely beneficial. Even for those who read well, there is still great benefit in listening to the text being read aloud. Many Christians are encouraged by listening to the

³¹ See David Helm, *One-to-One Bible Reading: A Simple Guide for Every Christian* (Kingsford, Australia: Matthias Media, 2011).

Bible while shaving, brushing their teeth, getting dressed, driving the car, washing the dishes, or at any number of other times.

Read large portions at a time. There are times and places to read just a few verses of a particular chapter. Careful study of a text can be very edifying and richly rewarding. But instead of exclusively reading small portions, reading large portions of the Bible helps Christians zoom out and gain greater appreciation for how that book of the Bible fits together. They also come to understand each of the small units of that book better as well. As Christians begin investing in this practice, they often notice common themes, phrases, and words that help readers move toward interpreting the text accurately. Theologian James Hamilton promotes this concept simply: “Don’t make this harder than it needs to be. Read the Bible. A lot.”³²

Identify the genre. This is simply another way of urging readers to pay attention to *how* a passage is written. Is this passage a story, like Daniel 6? Is this a letter, like Ephesians? Is this a poetic wisdom section, like Ecclesiastes? Those three genres are very popular in the Bible, and they are all very different from one another, which means readers need to have different considerations for each one. Ecclesiastes often includes repetition between one line and the next. Letters like Ephesians will be characterized by a more rigid argument, so readers would look for key transitional words like “therefore,” “because,” and “if/then.” Usually narrative sections do not tell readers explicitly what that passage is intended to communicate, but the text often includes obvious clues and signals, such as a concluding statement in a speech.

Another aspect of analyzing the genre is identifying what a larger section of the Bible is aiming to accomplish. Is it advancing the storyline, such as in 1-2 Kings,

³² James M. Hamilton Jr., *What Is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible’s Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 115.

describing the downfall of the people of God? Or is it reflecting on the storyline, such as in the wisdom books or the New Testament epistles? Identify how a passage is written (is it more like an email, or a book of poems, or a newspaper?), and then also what it is doing—is it telling you part of the story, or telling the reader how to live in light of the story?

Consider the contexts. Every passage is written with multiple contexts. What is the historical context? Perhaps Paul is writing to a church that has been unwittingly drinking the poison of false teaching. Maybe David is writing while he is running for his life from his own son, as in Psalm 3. Maybe God’s people are about to cross into the promised land and are fearful about what they will experience along the way. That context matters. But there’s also the near context of a passage—what came just before this passage? What comes just after it? The far context is also significant, and that includes the very farthest context of how a passage fits into the message of the whole Bible.³³ Good Bible students will consider as many of those aspects as possible at one time. A reliable study Bible also helps with this aspect, as will a variety of other basic resources, many of which are available for free online.

Christians must remember that a passage must not mean something that the author himself would not have meant by it. A common favorite verse for non-Christians is “judge not that you be not judged.” But that does not mean to avoid being discerning, or to simply let people continue living in sin. Too many other passages command Christians to “exhort one another” and “rescue the wandering” to allow that meaning about leaving fellow Christians to live however they choose. The larger contexts help readers know what a passage means, rather than reading a statement in isolation.

³³ The role of various levels of context in understanding the message of a particular biblical text is addressed at length in Trent Hunter and Stephen Wellum, *Christ from Beginning to End: How the Full Story of Scripture Reveals the Full Glory of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 42-69. See also Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 55-68.

Read and re-read the text. Very rarely is a passage so easily understood that someone can identify the meaning clearly the first time they read it. Repetition in reading provides a significant difference, and many readers find that using multiple translations in Bible reading is advantageous. Alternate reading between reliable translations like the ESV, NASB, and NIV.

Look for repetition in the passage. This may be in the form of repeated words and phrases, such as in Isaiah 9 and 10 where the prophet says that the people of God have not repented despite God's acts on their behalf, and as a result his hand is stretched out against them. He says that four times in a very small space on the page. That kind of repetition clearly communicates something significant about Isaiah's message. Because of the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, Christians can be convinced that every element of repetition in the Bible is there on purpose. God gave no wasted words, no wasted phrases, no wasted paragraphs.

Consider how passages relate. In other words, readers should ask, "what other passages come to mind when I read this? For instance, someone could read Daniel 6 and think, "Daniel was a godly man. That reminds me of Psalm 1:1-2—the kind of person who avoids wicked people because he loves the word of God." Daniel beautifully illustrates the kind of person who is changed by the word of God through his meditation on it. Similarly, those who had him thrown to the lions call to mind the person who is like chaff driven away by the wind in Psalm 1:4.

Similarly, someone could read Jeremiah 2, where the Lord says that sinners have forsaken him, the "fountain of living water." Then in John 4, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that if she had asked him, he would have given her "living water." And then in Revelation 7, God says he will guide his people to "living water" for all eternity.

Let clear passages interpret less-clear passages. Plenty of passages in both the Old Testament and New Testament are difficult to understand or even to reconcile with others. But the Bible never contradicts itself. Readers should let passages that are crystal clear—that God is both loving and holy, full of wrath and full of mercy—help them understand why God works in a certain way in a given passage.

Ask good questions. Many basic questions can help get readers off the ground as they consider the details of a text. Who is writing this passage, and to whom? Why is he writing it? When was it written? Where were his readers living? How should they obey this command? What were the circumstances behind this passage being written in the first place? Not every question will be necessary with every passage of the Bible, but these questions will help readers stay focused on the message of the text, make progress in interpreting the passage faithfully, and apply it to life and ministry.³⁴

Identify the main message or truth of the passage. Every passage has a big idea that lies behind all the smaller ideas of a given text. Readers should not allow themselves to become discouraged if they struggle to formulate a concise sentence, but even the effort of working to identify what the passage is about is an immensely fruitful exercise. Working toward that goal helps keep readers from simply glazing their eyes over the page without thinking carefully about its meaning.

Consider how the passage connects to the gospel. A given text will connect to the gospel in a variety of ways, but it is important that readers not get overly creative. Rather, they should look for what is most natural to a particular text. Every passage of the Bible relates to the gospel in one form or another. That is to say, every passage in some

³⁴ Theologian Matthew Harmon provides a list of eight further questions that Christians should ask of every passage they read, including those that help both interpret and apply the scriptural text. See Harmon, *Asking the Right Questions: A Practical Guide to Understanding and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).

way refers to God’s saving kindness, the judgment sinners deserve, the right response to God or to his works, and so on. This means that in some passages, Christians should move toward the cross in a very different way than in another.³⁵

Some passages anticipate Jesus Christ through typology. In other words, Daniel gives glimpses of what Jesus would be like, how he would live, and what would happen to him. Daniel did nothing wrong but was sealed in a pit and then came out alive. A more frequent way a passage will connect to the gospel is through a promise and seeing how Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of the promise. Additionally, many passages describe or at least touch on biblical themes such as the temple, sin, forgiveness, worship, or dozens more. All of those themes culminate in the gospel message and Christ himself. In short, the whole Bible anticipates and describes Christ and what it looks like to live for his glory, so expect that every passage you are reading relates to the person and work of Christ in the gospel.

Identify how the passage applies to your life. After doing the hardest part of the work—identifying what the passage says and why it was written, students of Scripture can then consider various ways the passage applies and carries weight to circumstances of life. Sometimes Christians jump to this question too quickly, and thereby misinterpret what the text actually says. Many Christians are often inclined to see the Bible as an instruction manual to life, or as a guide to living “the good life.” Clearly, though, Daniel was not living the good life when he was thrown in a pit of lions. Jesus was not living the good life when he was hanging on a cross. Paul was not living the good life when he was being persecuted, lied about, shipwrecked, and endangered. Rather than asking how a passage can help life go better, instead ask a series of questions. “How can I love my family better because of this passage? Whom at church do I need to

³⁵ See the works by DeRouchie and Greidanus listed in the bibliography as a useful starting point in developing this skill.

pursue? Whom do I need to talk with? What sin pattern do I need to confess to someone and ask for their help? What habits have I developed that dishonor the Lord or at least make it difficult for me to love my family well? What graces (like humility or brokenness over sin) does this passage call for? How can I obey this passage in my college dorm context, or in the workplace?” These are the kinds of questions Bible readers should ask once the meaning of the text is clear.

Conclusion

The Bible is a priceless treasure, yet it is readily accessible. Most Christian families have copies of it throughout their homes, in easy-to-read language. So, then, read this book with joy. Study it with zeal. Listen to sermons explaining and applying it. The Bible reveals the God who created all things and gave his Son to rescue sinners so that they can be reconciled to him forever. As those who have been saved by his grace, Christians are responsible to grow in their biblical literacy—their ability to read, understand, and synthesize the whole Bible effectively.

Yet it is impossible for Christians to be biblically literate while their minds are scattered in countless directions. The challenge is great, but those who would know Christ and his word well must discipline themselves for this sacred task of knowing God through the Bible.

Christians only have so much time before their lives are gone. Now is the time to study the word. Now is the time to set distractions aside and let the word of truth change you into the image of Christ. Albert Mohler relates his own intent to use time well: “I can feel the passing of time in my bones, and that knowledge makes me want to be a more faithful steward of time tomorrow than I was today. Time will tell.”³⁶

³⁶ R. Albert Mohler Jr., *The Conviction to Lead: 25 Principles for Leadership That Lasts* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2012), 189.

CHAPTER 4

DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF TEACHING THE REDEMPTIVE STORYLINE OF THE BIBLE TO INCREASE BIBLICAL LITERACY

The purpose of this project was to teach the redemptive storyline of the Bible to the members of Brainard Avenue Baptist Church with the intent of increasing biblical literacy. As described in Chapter 1, this project defines biblical literacy as *the ability to read the Bible accurately and draw relevant connections between one part of the Bible and another*.

To fulfill this purpose, I created a sermon series, preached it in the context of weekly worship services, and then evaluated whether the sermon series was successful in bringing the church body to greater biblical understanding.

Development of the Sermon Series

The sermon series was prepared from December 2020 through April 2021, but it was preached over the course of ten weeks. Before the series was prepared, the SBTS Ethics Committee approved the ethics forms for the project, including a survey given to church members before the sermon series began. Once the survey was administered, the sermon series was formally developed and then delivered in ten sermons. After preaching the series, the survey was administered a second time to gauge whether the series was successful.

Preliminary Preparations

The Ethics committee approved the Ethics packet on August 26, 2020. Personal circumstances prohibited the formal beginning of the sermon series, so the next step in the development stage was delayed until early January 2021.

The Brainard Avenue Baptist Church congregation received paper copies of the survey on January 10, 2021, along with access to an electronic copy for those who preferred to respond online. The content of the hard copy of the survey was identical to the online survey. Participants were asked to return the forms by the following Sunday, January 17. Almost everyone who completed the forms were able to turn them in to the church office on time.

Once the congregation completed the surveys, the details of the first several sermons of the series were able to be finalized. The sermon series was written over about twelve weeks, with initial drafts of the first few sermons starting in late December 2020. Most sermons were drafted in manuscript form about 6-10 days before the date they were to be preached, and then were sent to a panel of pastors and theologically-minded acquaintances.¹ The panel individually reviewed each sermon and returned a corresponding evaluation form, and in some cases, detailed notes throughout the sermon manuscripts. Those comments and evaluations influenced the final manuscript of each sermon.

Summary of Each Sermon

The goal of the first sermon was to establish that the Bible is one book, written by one divine author, telling one coherent, unified story. The text for the sermon was Luke 24:13-35, focusing on how Jesus himself taught his disciples how to read the Bible, as a story focused on his redemptive work.

The second sermon of the series, from Acts 3, was about how the apostles themselves rightly understood the Old Testament as being a unified story about redemption through Christ.

¹ The panel consisted of four individuals, all of whom have significant theological training and experience in teaching and preaching the Bible.

Sermons 3 through 9 traced the drama of the Bible's storyline and a few significant themes in the development of the Bible's redemptive story. The goal of the third sermon, from Genesis 1, was to show that creation is the loving, wise, delightful act of God in which he took great pleasure and received great glory.

Sermon 4 considered the goal of creation. Genesis 1-2 served as the primary text, but other passages supported the overall message as well. The concept of the sermon was that in creating the world and filling it with image-bearers, God had a glorious goal in mind: to establish a beautiful temple-city on a holy mountain where he dwells with his holy people in peace and security and where his glory fills the land.

Genesis 3 was the text for the fifth sermon. The goal of the sermon was to prove that the Fall is a fundamental element for understanding the Bible and everything in the world. In other words, everyone inherently knows that something is wrong in the world today, but only the Bible gives a satisfactorily comprehensive and compelling explanation of what that problem is—rebellion against God and the subsequent curse.

The sixth sermon celebrated God's determined plan to redeem his fallen people. The text of the sermon was Romans 3:21-26. It exposed the glorious truth that through Jesus Christ, God righteously declares righteous the unrighteous. Specifically, in that passage Paul pronounces four statements about the righteousness of God. If the Bible is a story about God restoring his falling creatures, this passage is the hinge of that story.

Sermon 7 was from Galatians 3:1-14, and was intended to clarify the use of the law in the Christian's life in light of redemption through Christ. This sermon seemed necessary considering the way many Christians either understate or overstate how Christians should respond to the Old Testament law.

The goal of sermon 8 was to expose the significance of the biblical theme of spiritual conflict. Beginning in Genesis 3, the Bible is a story of good versus evil. Daniel 3 was the text for this sermon. It argued that the story of the three Hebrew men living in Babylon is a microcosm of how the Bible portrays rebellious humanity (the seed of the

serpent) warring against God and his people (the seed of the woman), and God demonstrating his power and glory in the face of that wicked rebellion. It called for the church body to see the allure of the world for what it is, and to recognize that only God's kingdom lasts forever.

Sermon 9 was designed to describe the concluding scene of the Bible's story, from Revelation 21-22. The sermon exposed that the Bible gloriously ends with God's people in God's place, forever united with him. Considering the conflict, sorrow, and sin in the world today, the promise of the end of the story that that passage provides is truly gospel hope.

The tenth and final sermon suggested practical skills toward helping the church family read the Bible more fruitfully. Its aim was to compel the congregation to read the Bible regularly, knowledgably, and productively.

Implementation of the Sermon Series

I preached the sermon series at Brainard Avenue Baptist Church from January 24 through April 11, 2021.² The sermons were preached during the regular Sunday morning worship services. Due to the small size of this church's membership, concerns with the pandemic, and many weeks of inclement winter weather, the average attendance at those services was about 30 people. Most of the sermons averaged 35-45 minutes in length.

Due to the nature of formal worship services, the congregation was not able to discuss the sermon content or ask questions during the sermons. Many members of the church did, however, ask questions or make comments about the sermons in later interactions, and those comments were almost entirely positive.

² That time period encompassed twelve weeks rather than ten, but one worship service had to be canceled during those weeks due to inclement weather. Another week was Easter, and a separate sermon was preached for that day.

A full week after the preaching of the tenth sermon, a group of church members met during the regular Sunday School hour to discuss the Basics of the Biblical Storyline survey retroactively and to ask questions based on the sermon series. Whether they attended that discussion or not, the congregation was asked to return their second survey by May 1, 2021. The scores of that second survey were compared statistically with the scores of the first survey to determine whether the congregation saw measurable growth in biblical literacy. Details about these surveys are described in Chapter Five below.

Evaluation of the Sermon Series

After the sermon series was completely developed and preached, members of the congregation took the survey for a second time. The results of the survey were compiled and the whole project was evaluated to see if it achieved the goals stated in chapter 1. These goals were to assess a group of adults at BABC on their current understanding of the Bible and, particularly, its storyline and themes. This goal was to be measured by writing and administering a survey to the adults who would be in the worship services. Prior to the first sermon, members of BABC completed a Basics of the Biblical Storyline (BBS) survey.³ This survey was designed to assess the ability of each member to identify the storyline in various passages and connect a given passage with various elements of the storyline. This goal would be considered successfully met when thirty members complete the BBS survey and the results have been compiled electronically.

The second goal was to develop the ten-week preaching series described above, which was specifically crafted toward increasing biblical literacy at BABC. The sermons were to teach members to read the Bible with understanding and accuracy—in

³ See appendix 1.

other words, the series would provide them with the map they need to move from one location in the Bible to the next. The sermons would trace the biblical storyline from multiple angles, through what are often considered the four acts of the drama of Scripture: creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. This goal was to be measured by the expert panel who utilized a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability of each sermon. This goal was to be considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criteria met or exceeded the sufficient level. If the 90 percent benchmark was not initially met, the material would be revised until it met the standard.

The third goal was to increase biblical literacy by means of preaching the developed sermon series. This preaching was to take place in the normal Sunday morning worship services. This goal was to be measured by administering a pre- and post-survey which would be used to measure the change in biblical literacy. This goal would be considered successfully met when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive, statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-survey scores.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT EVALUATION

Over one hundred years ago, Theodore Roosevelt and a band of explorers traveled through an uncharted tributary of the Amazon River in Brazil. Their journey involved horrifying encounters with dangers from every side and proved ultimately fatal for several members of the expedition, and nearly fatal for the rest. Even those who survived had to make multiple harrowing decisions to have even a chance at living to tell the story.¹ At the expense of sounding overly dramatic, finishing this project has felt reminiscent of that journey. Many days over the past few years, it felt as if the energy and blocks of time needed to finish the project would never arrive. Now that the writing and implementing of the project is in the past, this final chapter evaluates the relative success of the project and reflects on the lessons I learned through the process of writing and implementing this project.

Evaluation of the Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project was to increase biblical literacy of the members of Brainard Avenue Baptist Church in Countryside, Illinois, by means of teaching the redemptive storyline of the Bible.

I believe this was a worthy purpose for this project. It represents a God-glorifying desire, and I believe the method I used for seeking to accomplish the purpose was appropriate and consistent with God's goal for sanctifying believers through Scripture.

¹ Candace Millard, *The River of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt's Darkest Journey* (New York: Broadway, 2005).

To fulfill this purpose, I created a sermon series, preached it in the context of weekly Sunday worship services, and then evaluated whether the sermon series was successful in bringing the church body to greater biblical understanding.

Based on feedback from the church body, both subjectively in nature from informal conversations and objectively from surveys, I believe the project adequately accomplished the given purpose.

Evaluation of the Goals of the Project

I established three specific goals to guide this project toward success and to determine whether the project was effective.

Goal 1: Assess Biblical Understanding

The first goal was to assess a group of adults at BABC on their current understanding of the Bible and, particularly, its storyline and themes. This goal was measured by writing and administering a survey to the adults who would be in the worship services. Prior to the first sermon, members of BABC completed a Basics of the Biblical Storyline (BBS) survey.² This survey assessed the ability of each member to identify the storyline in various passages and connect a given passage with various elements of the storyline.

The questions on the survey sought to identify the congregation's strengths and weaknesses with regard to knowledge about various biblical themes, about the basic integrity of the Bible, and about how the Old Testament and New Testament are related.³

² See Appendix 1. The average adult Sunday attendance at Brainard Avenue Baptist Church is 40.

³ Questions 1, 2, and 3 should not have been numbered. That was an unintentional oversight. Those questions were intended to simply gather data, as were the questions directly preceding them, which were correctly left unnumbered. If someone said they had never read even the entire New Testament, I expected them to miss more questions than the people who said they had read the entire Bible. Pairing that question with the unnumbered questions about how long the person had been a Christian and how many days on average they read their Bible, I expected that those who have read their Bible both comprehensively and habitually would score higher than those who rarely read their Bible. Essentially, those questions were intended to explain possible reasons for any particularly low scores.

Of the 37 remaining questions after questions 1, 2, and 3 are excluded, eleven questions were answered incorrectly by at least five individuals (roughly a quarter of the respondents) on the first survey, likely indicating less familiarity with the concepts those questions were addressing, or in some cases, possibly indicating poorly worded survey questions.

| Question | Incorrect responses |
|--|----------------------------|
| 5. When Jesus refers to “the law, the Prophets, and the Writings,” he is describing just a few segments of the Old Testament. (True/False) | 6 |
| 7. The Bible is best understood as one book, written by one divine Author. (True/False) | 6 |
| 9. A Christian could explain the gospel to an unbeliever using any one book of the Bible. (True/False) | 6 |
| 15. The beginning and ending of the Bible are similar. (True/False) | 5 |
| 19. The Wisdom Books (Job-Song of Solomon) formally advance the storyline of the Bible. (True/False) | 12 |
| 20. Paul’s epistles (Romans-Philemon) formally advance the storyline of the Bible. (True/False) | 15 |
| 27. The first hint of the gospel message is in Genesis 12. (True/False) | 6 |
| 28. Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Jesus are all similar figures. (True/False) | 6 |
| 35. All these are called “the son of God” in the Bible: Adam, Israel, David, Solomon, Jesus. (True/False) | 14 |
| 37. “Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth (BIBLE) is a good way to summarize the purpose and content of the Bible. (True/False) | 6 |
| 40. Which of the following is NOT a major theme in the Bible? (multiple choice) | 6 |

Figure 1. Frequently Missed Questions

Questions 6 and 28 were similar in that they discuss how the Pentateuch prepares for the rest of the story, especially the theme of redemption, and how key figures correspond to Christ. Question 6 was only answered incorrectly by one individual. Question 28, however, was missed six times. The concept behind question 28 is that the

individuals named all represent a new beginning in the biblical story. As Gentry and Wellum observe, “Abraham and his family, later called Israel, is, as it were, a last Adam. God made a major new start with Noah. Now he is making a new start with Abraham. There are no major new beginnings after this in the narrative of Scripture (until we come to the new creation at the end of the story).”⁴

In this way, Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Jesus are all the heads of a “new creation.” The following chart demonstrates the parallels between these biblical figures.

| Representative Person | Preceding Obstacle | Place |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------|
| Adam | Without form and void | Eden |
| Noah | Flood | New world |
| Abraham | Babel | Canaan |
| Jesus | Sin and the curse | New Creation |

Figure 2. Similarities Between New Beginnings in the Bible’s Story

Two frequently missed questions, 7 and 37, were focused on identifying how the congregation viewed the Bible as a whole. Is it primarily a rule book or instruction manual, or primarily a story? (Other questions, such as 10 and 13, had a similar purpose, but almost all respondents answered those questions correctly on the pre-survey.) One of the primary problems with viewing the Bible as a manual for a successful life, for instance, is that it severely diminishes the importance of the vast majority of Old and New Testament narrative. Even a crucial doctrine such as the incarnation is essentially pointless if a Christian is reading it merely in search of “basic instructions.”⁵

⁴ Gentry & Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 264.

⁵ The background for the wording of the question about “Basic Instructions Before Leaving

Question 9 (with six incorrect answers), along with 33 and 36 (both of which were answered correctly by almost all respondents on the pre-survey), was designed to see whether the congregation viewed only certain parts of the Bible as being particularly relevant to the doctrine of salvation. In other words, people would likely turn quickly to portions of the Gospel of John or the epistle to the Romans when seeking to study or explain the gospel message, but then glaze over huge portions of the Bible that also emphasize God’s saving mercy or his judgment on his enemies. Countless narratives in the Old Testament demonstrate the righteousness of God in defending his own holy name against blasphemous enemies who sought their own glory at the expense of his people.

Questions 11 and 12 are not included in the list of frequently missed questions but are similar and noteworthy. These questions focus on how later biblical authors were drawing off and interpreting the work of earlier authors. While all but one respondent correctly answered question 11 (about the New Testament use of the Old Testament), four individuals missed question 12 (about the Old Testament use of the Old Testament). In asking that question, I was seeking to determine how well the congregation recognized that the Psalms and the Prophets, as two noteworthy examples, were not working off a blank slate. They were making use of the major turning points in Israel’s history, such as the exodus, as well as in events such as creation and the flood. Jim Hamilton writes of how Jesus himself “learned to read the Bible, history, and life from Moses and the Prophets, and he taught this perspective to his followers (Luke 24).”⁶ The congregation, as indicated, were quick to recognize that reality in the New Testament but less so in the Old Testament.

Earth” is that I have had members of all three churches I have served in as a pastor (in three different states) share that acronym with me, as if they had found it as a particularly useful way of summarizing the message of the Bible. That anecdotal observation indicated that perhaps many Christians view the Bible with that same deficient understanding.

⁶ Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?*, 21.

Questions 5, 19, and 20 were very similar to each other and were some of the most frequently missed questions (especially 19 and 20).⁷

| <i>Old Testament</i> | | | | |
|--|---|---|--|---|
| Law | Former & Latter Prophets | | Former & Latter Writings | |
| Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy | Joshua Judges 1-2 Samuel 1-2 Kings | Jeremiah Ezekiel Isaiah The Twelve | Ruth Psalms Job Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Songs Lamentations | Daniel Esther Ezra- Nehemiah 1-2 Chronicles |
| Narrative | Narrative | Commentary | Commentary | Narrative |
| <i>New Testament</i> | | | | |
| Gospels | Acts | Paul's Epistles | General Epistles | Revelation |
| Matthew Mark Luke John | Acts | Romans 1 & 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 & 2 Thess. 1 & 2 Timothy Titus Philemon | Hebrews James 1 & 2 Peter 1, 2, 3 John Jude | Revelation |
| Narrative | Narrative | Commentary | Commentary | Narrative |

Figure 3. How the Bible is Arranged⁸

⁷ Question 18 was nearly identical in wording to questions 19 and 20, but only four individuals missed that question on the pre-survey. The answer to that question (about 1-2 Kings formally advancing the storyline) was “true,” and the correct answer to 19 and 20 was “false.” Most people simply answered “true” to all three of those questions, or in some cases, failed to answer any of the three, likely indicating confusion. One theory that might explain at least part of the confusion is that perhaps the emphasis on how the Bible is best understood as a unified story made people conclude that every part of the Bible told the story in the exact same way.

⁸ The Old Testament section of the chart is from DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament*, 24-26. He credits Stephen G. Dempster, who identifies the same pattern: “The New Testament is structured similarly to the Tanakh: story (Gospels, Acts), commentary (Letters), story (Revelation). Although the last book is not strictly narrative, it carries to a conclusion the storyline begun in the Gospels.” Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A theology of the Hebrew Bible*, NSBT 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 45-51, 232. DeRouchie does not lay out the chart for the New Testament, but alludes to the possibility (26n6). My chart simply continues what he began. It stretches out the parallel between the structure of the Old Testament and New Testament by differentiating between the Gospels and

The answers to these questions exposed that our congregation (and presumably most Christians in general) struggles to differentiate how various parts of the Bible complement one another. Some parts of the Bible *tell* the story (narrative), and other parts *comment* on the story or explain the implications of the story (commentary).

Questions 15 and 16 are regarding how the beginning and the ending of the Bible are (intentionally) similar. My hope was that even if a Christian had never noticed the similarities between the beginning and end of the Bible, they may have been able to start to see comparisons, such as the paradisaical environment, the tree of life, the flowing river, the active presence of God, and the absence of sin. Theologian Andy Naselli observes some of the similarities with regard to the work of Satan and presence of evil at the Bible's bookends: "At the beginning of Genesis, when the snake tempts Eve, sin and death enter the world and God banishes humans from his presence. At the end of Revelation, God conquers the dragon, banishes sin, destroys death, and lives among his people in the Most Holy Place, the worldwide garden."⁹ Only one person answered question 16 incorrectly, but five missed question 15 ("the beginning and ending of the Bible are similar [true/false]"). (On the post-survey, all respondents gave a correct answer.)

Question 17 ("The Bible has a happy ending", True/False) was intended to gauge how the congregation views God's justice, and whether they were looking at the Bible's narrative from a God-centered or man-centered standpoint. Only one person answered incorrectly on the pre-survey, and all respondents were correct on the post-survey. In asking the question, I was working off the understanding that if someone assumed the Bible's ending was in some way disappointing or disturbing, it would

Acts as two narrative sections, and Paul's epistles and the General Epistles as two commentary sections. DeRouchie admits that doing so is not necessary but is a convenient way of demonstrating how the Bible is arranged in a similar pattern between the Old and New Testaments.

⁹ Andrew David Naselli, *The Serpent and the Serpent Slayer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 122.

indicate at best something of a man-centered perspective about the Bible.¹⁰ As Gregory Beale acknowledges, “When people refuse God’s provision to heal them from the deadly bite of the satanic serpent, then God has no other choice but to allow them to perish forever.”¹¹

Questions 21, 30, and 33 focus on the prevalence of the teaching on creation in all portions of Scripture. Entire psalms focus on the glory of God in creation; the prophets allude to creation routinely; and Paul regularly argued from creation themes to teach. The answers to these questions were largely correct on the pre-survey, yet I still preached two sermons on creation to emphasize how the biblical authors were regularly harkening back to creation to both teach believers and fortify their faith.

Question 27 was designed to examine how familiar the congregation was with the concept of the protoevangelium. Six individuals answered incorrectly on the pre-survey. In the sermon series, therefore, I sought to draw out the significance of both the curse and the promise inherent in Genesis 3:15. Only one individual answered the question incorrectly on the post-survey.

Questions 26 and 29 both discuss the predominant theme of good vs. evil that extends from Genesis 3 to Revelation 20. Andy Naselli has written a brief book on the theme of the Serpent and evil (and its ultimate demise through Jesus Christ). He demonstrates the practical value of a right theology of the theme of Christ’s defeat over evil: “Yes, difficult and tragic events will continue to occur. But you know that the serpent slayer has already decisively defeated the serpent and that at the end he will

¹⁰ In personal conversations, several people asked about that question and seemed uncertain about whether their answer was correct. A few of those individuals expressed that the reality of eternal judgment on God’s enemies put a damper on the Bible’s conclusion—in other words, it does not have the “happy ending” that they have come to expect. I sought to overcome that perspective in various sermons during the implementation phase.

¹¹ G. K. Beale, *Redemptive Reversals and the Ironic Overturning of Human Wisdom* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 107.

finally and completely crush the serpent. . . . In the end we will jubilantly rejoice that Jesus has finally conquered the serpent.”¹²

Thomas Schreiner also spends significant time describing the theme of the biblical theme of the seed of the woman in battle with the seed of the serpent. “The Lord promises a future victory over the serpent through the offspring of the woman ([Gen.] 3:15). The victory will not be easy, however, for it will come through intense conflict with the offspring of the serpent.” He continues, “Cain did not turn out to be the promised deliverer. On the contrary, it became clear that he sided with the serpent. The battle between the children of the serpent and the children of the woman had begun.”¹³

Commenting on Genesis 4 and 5 and the contrast between Cain and Seth’s lineages, T. D. Alexander similarly observes, “Here we encounter the idea that human beings may by their actions be perceived as belonging either to the unrighteous ‘offspring of the serpent’ or to the righteous ‘offspring of the woman’. . . . The point is made that the children of God will resemble him by how they live; the same is true regarding the children of the devil.”¹⁴

Evaluation of Goal 1. I noted in the first chapter that this goal would be considered successfully met when thirty members completed the BBS and the results compiled. In reality, only nineteen adults completed the initial survey. This outcome was affected by the pandemic and the nature of life in a small church. Because of these factors, we rarely had more than twenty adults in attendance on any given Sunday.

¹² Naselli, *The Serpent and the Serpent Slayer*, 131.

¹³ Thomas Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 10-11.

¹⁴ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 107-8).

The vast majority of respondents scored very well on the surveys. A few outliers missed more than five out of the forty questions, but for the most part those who took the survey only missed between 5-10 questions. Further details are provided below.

Goal 2: Develop a Preaching Series

The second goal was to develop a ten-week preaching series for increasing biblical literacy at BABC. The curriculum was intended to teach members to read the Bible with understanding and accuracy—in other words, its aim was to provide them with the map they need to move from one location in the Bible to the next. The curriculum sought to trace the biblical storyline from multiple angles, through what are often considered the four acts of the drama of Scripture: creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. This goal was measured by an expert panel who utilized a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability of each sermon. This goal was to be considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criteria met or exceeded the sufficient level.

The expert panel gave very helpful feedback. Some gave far more feedback than others, including extensive notes throughout the sermon manuscripts. Others primarily filled in the rubric and occasionally sent an additional note or two. Overall, however, the panel was very helpful and their feedback was often encouraging and fruitful, making the sermons clearer both in content and style. All of the evaluation criteria met or exceeded the sufficient level.¹⁵

Goal 3: Increase Biblical Literacy

The third goal was to increase biblical literacy by means of preaching the developed sermon series. This preaching took place in the normal Sunday morning worship services. The success of this goal was measured by administering a pre- and

¹⁵ The sermon manuscripts are included in appendix 2.

post-survey which was used to measure the change in biblical literacy. This goal would be considered successfully met when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-survey scores.

In terms of the specific questions, the following chart (built off Figure 1 on page 66) demonstrates where the most progress was achieved and where room for improvement remained.

| Question | Incorrect responses (pre) | Incorrect responses (post) |
|--|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 5. When Jesus refers to “the law, the Prophets, and the Writings,” he is describing just a few segments of the Old Testament. (True/False) | 6 | 0 |
| 7. The Bible is best understood as one book, written by one divine Author. (True/False) | 6 | 0 |
| 9. A Christian could explain the gospel to an unbeliever using any one book of the Bible. (True/False) | 6 | 0 |
| 15. The beginning and ending of the Bible are similar. (True/False) | 5 | 0 |
| 19. The Wisdom Books (Job-Song of Solomon) formally advance the storyline of the Bible. (True/False) | 12 | 3 |
| 20. Paul’s epistles (Romans-Philemon) formally advance the storyline of the Bible. (True/False) | 15 | 4 |
| 27. The first hint of the gospel message is in Genesis 12. (True/False) | 6 | 1 |
| 28. Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Jesus are all similar figures. (True/False) | 6 | 1 |
| 35. All these are called “the son of God” in the Bible: Adam, Israel, David, Solomon, Jesus. (True/False) | 14 | 0 |
| 37. “Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth (BIBLE) is a good way to summarize the purpose and content of the Bible. (True/False) | 6 | 0 |
| 40. Which of the following is NOT a major theme in the Bible? (multiple choice) | 6 | 0 |

Figure 4. Improvement from Pre to Post Survey

The Survey Score Distribution chart demonstrates that the sermon series had the successful influence on the biblical literacy I was hoping to achieve. All eight individuals who completed the post-survey achieved a score of at least 91 percent.

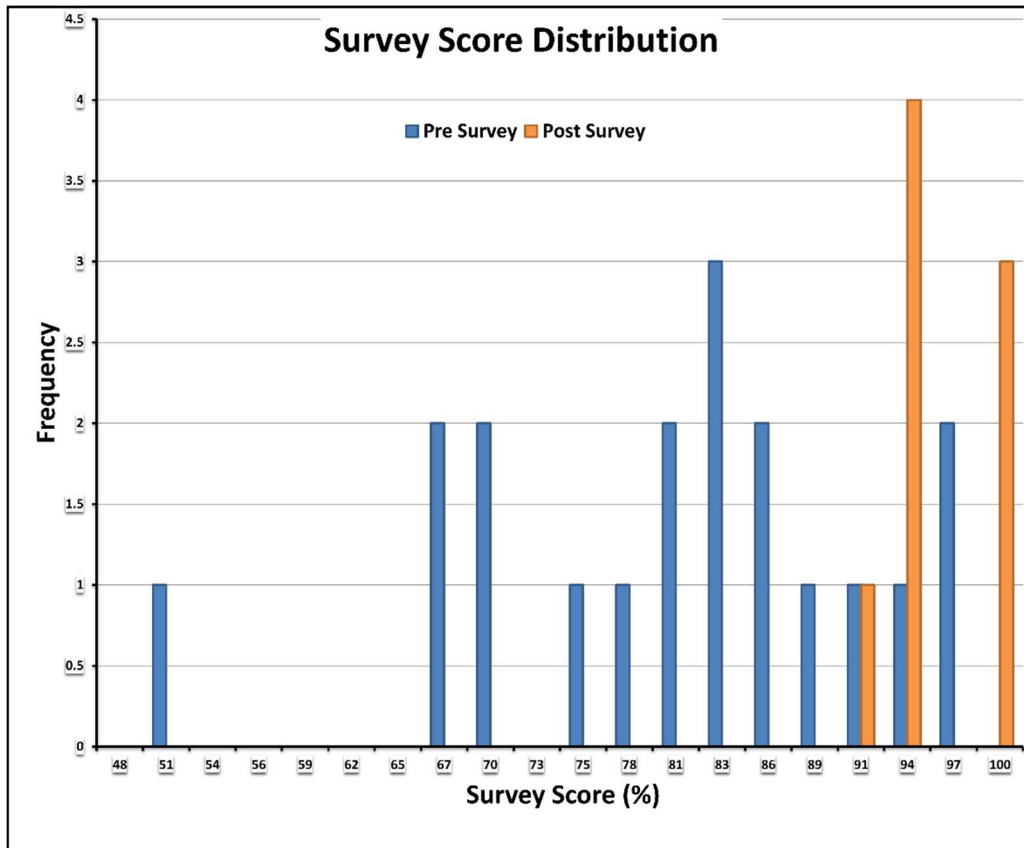


Figure 5. Survey Score Distribution

The Paired Respondent Survey Scores demonstrates that all eight individuals who responded to both surveys improved their score from the first survey to the second. Respondent 8 had very little room to improve on the survey after the pre-survey, but still at least had a slight increase in percentage of correct answers.

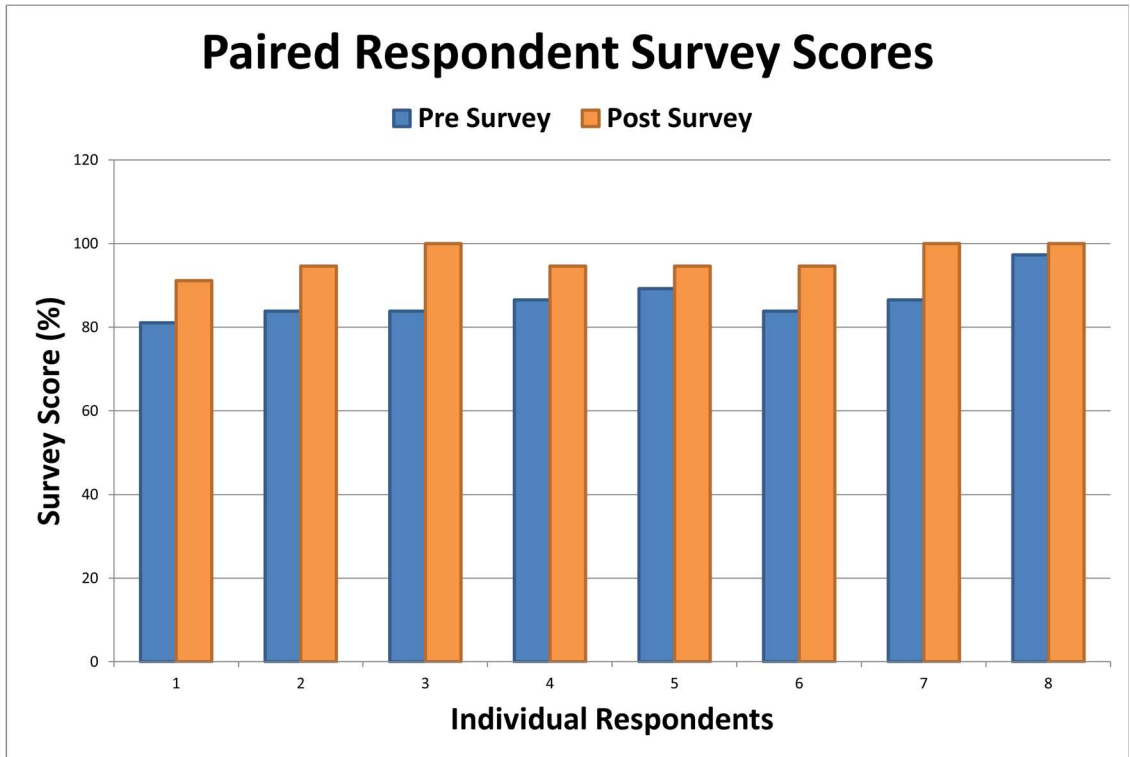


Figure 6. Paired Respondent Survey Scores

The specific paired scores (as opposed to merely the percentage correct) of each respondent are recorded below:

| Paired Respondent Survey Scores | | |
|---------------------------------|------------|-------------|
| Respondent | Pre Survey | Post Survey |
| 1. | 81.1 | 91.1 |
| 2. | 83.8 | 94.6 |
| 3. | 83.8 | 100 |
| 4. | 86.5 | 94.6 |
| 5. | 89.2 | 94.6 |
| 6. | 83.8 | 94.6 |
| 7. | 86.5 | 100 |
| 8. | 97.3 | 100 |

Figure 7. Paired Respondent Survey Scores



Figure 8. Statistical Comparison of Mean Scores

Figure 8 demonstrates that whether one considers the unpaired data or the paired data, survey respondents significantly improved their scores from the first survey to the second. The one-tailed t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive, statistically significant difference between the paired pre- and post-survey scores: $t_{(7)} = -6.38, p = .0002$.

I believe the greatest hindrance to seeing even more significant progress in the follow-up surveys was due to one notable factor: a much smaller group of participants returned the second survey. The cause of this discrepancy is unclear. For those who did submit their second surveys, however, a positive improvement was clear. Most who turned in a second survey had corrected over half (and in some cases, all) of the questions

they had answered incorrectly on the first survey.

Strengths of the Project

One of the strengths of the project was that the theme of increasing biblical literacy is applicable to almost all Christians. Even those who have been raised in Christian homes, have read the Bible from start to finish several times, and have faithfully attended worship services in healthy churches most of their lives can find room to grow in their understanding of how to connect the dots of the Bible's storyline.

The well of biblical theology will never run dry. That was a second strength of the project—the vast wealth of biblical material that in some way informs the basic gist of the project. Whether describing or illustrating the need for biblical literacy, or demonstrating the right way to read the Bible, the number of passages that could be applied to this project is countless.

Weaknesses of the Project

This project could have been improved in several ways. Two weaknesses in particular stand out among the rest. First, the survey I created and used to evaluate the congregation's level of biblical literacy, both before and after implementing the sermon series, was probably not difficult enough to truly gauge some elements of biblical literacy. Further questions on the relationship between the biblical covenants, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and other aspects of the New Testament use of the Old Testament could have strengthened the survey and made it more challenging for mature Christians. At the same time, nuanced questions of that sort may have been overly discouraging and intimidating for other, newer believers, making the Bible's primary message and themes seem out of reach. Even so, further efforts to strike that balance may have helped evaluate the church body's understanding and thereby helped shape the sermon series to equip the congregation better for making generous strides in biblical literacy.

Second, by implementing the project through a sermon series in the regular Sunday morning worship service, I did not give the congregation a natural way to ask questions, share personal observations, or otherwise give feedback during the course of the project. A few individuals did ask questions or give comments, but by having those follow-up conversations take place in private rather than in a group setting, the benefit of the conversations was quite limited. If I had taught the material in a small group setting, as an alternative example, it is possible that church members could have worked through a variety of biblical passages together in a workshop setting. That setting may have thereby provided the members greater progress in relating individual passages and the ability to be exposed to a wider variety of theological themes.

What I Would Do Differently

Surely no project is written in entirely ideal circumstances, but if I could have known even a small part of what the future held, I would have held off on beginning this doctoral program. A cross-country move for an entirely different ministry role, and a challenging family situation exasperated by a global pandemic, it turns out, makes for difficult sailing in the writing process.

More realistically, since I am not omniscient, I simply would have sought to make the survey more challenging or at least more precise. It was difficult to know how to gauge biblical understanding of the entire congregation, ranging from new believers to seminary-trained elders, without the survey being too easy or too difficult for most of the congregation. In all seriousness, the pandemic meant that weekly attendance was diminished, so fewer people completed the surveys than I initially expected, furthering the difficulty of getting an accurate read on the congregation's true level of biblical literacy.

The most substantial change I would consider in retrospect would be changing the theme of the project overall. When it became clear that I would likely be moving to a

new ministry setting, I briefly considered adjusting the topic to match the needs of the new congregation more closely. Due to a small but mature group of college and seminary students in our church, I contemplated starting the project over and writing a guide on developing church leaders. That change would have brought with it a whole new set of challenges, but it's possible that the smaller sample size of the people involved in the project's implementation would have made the process simpler and lead to faster turnaround time.

Theological Reflections

A theologically-driven project will inherently involve a significant degree of time spent contemplating and analyzing theological themes. In retrospect, work on this project created the opportunity to consider several theological themes that deserve comment.

First, regularly rehearsing and analyzing the Bible's storyline has given me greater appreciation for the stunning beauty of the Bible's unity amidst diversity.

Second, the life changes and challenges that affected my life over the course of this program gave increased opportunities to observe and reflect on the outworking of God's providence. I began this program while serving as the associate pastor of a church of about 100 people in a relatively rural community in Alabama. I finished the program while serving as the lead pastor of a church of about 50 people in a densely populated suburb just outside Chicago. This change in ministry settings had both positive and negative repercussions on my own life and especially on my family. I was routinely confronted with the fact that life circumstances are regularly outside our control as humans, and with the crucial need to think rightly about how the Lord works in ways that are both desirable and occasionally quite distressing.

Third, the essential nature of knowing the Bible, being stabilized by its truth, and drinking deeply from the well of hope it provides were all regularly impressed upon

me. Simply put, all Christians need the Bible. God was exceedingly merciful to reveal himself in written form, and then to oversee the transmission of the text providentially into English. The Bible gives light, life, and joy, and for those who listen to it, they receive the tangible and intangible blessing of God.

Personal Reflections

Besides learning more about God and his word, this project has also taught me about myself and my ministry. In a relatively normal, stable ministry and family context, I do not believe that this project would have been overly difficult for me. Instead of that idyllic scenario, however, our family encountered a high dose of suffering, leading to many days that felt overwhelmingly discouraging and at times even suffocating. Until these past few years, I have never experienced the sense of having personal productivity and progress be so difficult. I learned that the weekly preaching of the word of God and the daily responsibilities of family life must continue whether it feels natural or not. The counsel of 2 Timothy 4:2 to “be ready in season and out of season” was quite appropriate.

I was also encouraged that pastoral ministry is intended by God to be carried out for the long-haul. If I stay in this church for several decades, and faithfully preach the whole counsel of the word of God, the congregation’s progress toward biblical literacy will be far more visible than simply by surveying a handful of Christians before and after a ten-week sermon series.

Conclusion

I initially thought of writing this project on the theme of biblical theology while sitting in a classroom on the campus of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. I finished writing this final chapter on a cold winter day three years later in my office just outside Chicago. Much has changed over these three years, but the one constant has been the truthfulness and beauty of the word of God. May God receive all the glory as his people respond to his written revelation with repentant and joyful faith.

APPENDIX 1

BASICS OF THE BIBLICAL STORYLINE SURVEY

The following instrument is the Basics of the Biblical Storyline (BSS). Some general questions will be followed by a forty-question survey. The instrument's purpose is to assess each member's present level of understanding of the biblical storyline.

BASICS OF THE BIBLICAL STORYLINE SURVEY

Date: _____

Four digit code: _____

Number of years saved: 0-5 6-10 11-15 16-20 21-25 25+

Average number of days you read the Bible each week in the last year: 0-1 2-3 4-5
6-7

Circle True or False for each question:

1. I have read the entire Old Testament in my life. True/False
2. I have read the entire New Testament in my life. True/False
3. I have read the entire Bible in a twelve-month period in my life. True/False
4. The “Old Testament” is called that mostly just because it is older than the New Testament. True/False
5. When Jesus refers to “the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings,” he is describing just a few segments of the Old Testament. True/False
6. The first five books of the OT are foundational to the rest of the Bible.
True/False
7. The Bible is best understood as one book, written by one divine Author.
True/False
8. The Bible is best understood as a random compilation of 66 books.
True/False
9. A Christian could explain the gospel to an unbeliever using any one book of the Bible. True/False
10. Someone can understand the Bible well without viewing it as a story.
True/False
11. The New Testament regularly quotes and alludes to the Old Testament.
True/False
12. The Old Testament regularly quotes and alludes to the Old Testament.
True/False
13. The story of the Bible is still ongoing at this moment.
True/False
14. The Fall only affects certain parts of life. True/False
15. The beginning and ending of the Bible are similar. True/False
16. If there is a similarity between the beginning and end of the Bible, it is only coincidental. True/False
17. The Bible has a happy ending. True/False
18. 1-2 Kings formally advance the storyline of the Bible. True/False

19. The Wisdom Books (Job-Song of Solomon) formally advance the storyline of the Bible. True/False
20. Paul's epistles (Romans-Philemon) formally advance the storyline of the Bible. True/False
21. Creation is a significant element of the Bible only in a few select passages. True/False
22. The Bible occasionally contradicts itself. True/False
23. The Bible uses literary foreshadowing (types). True/False
24. Jesus saw himself as being at the center of the Bible's message. True/False
25. The Apostles saw Jesus as being at the center of the Bible's message. True/False
26. The "seed of the serpent/seed of the woman" concept is a theme throughout the Bible. True/False
27. The first hint of the gospel message is in Genesis 12. True/False
28. Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Jesus are all similar figures. True/False
29. Pharaoh, Goliath, Saul, Nebuchadnezzar, and Herod are all similar figures. True/False
30. On multiple occasions, Paul taught based on the doctrine of creation. True/False
31. The New Creation is partially described in the Old Testament. True/False
32. Christians should apply most laws from Leviticus and Deuteronomy directly to their lives. True/False
33. Creation and the Fall are strictly OT themes; Redemption and New Creation are strictly NT themes. True/False
34. The Bible is primarily a book about how to live "the good life." True/False
35. All these are called "the son of God" in the Bible: Adam, Israel, David, Solomon, Jesus. True/False
36. The Old Testament is primarily a history book, so it has very little to do with the gospel. True/False
37. "Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth" (BIBLE) is a good way to summarize the purpose and content of the Bible. True/False
38. The way most non-Christians explain what is wrong with people and the world is just as compelling and comprehensive as the Bible's explanation. True/False

Multiple choice: (circle all that apply)

39. The elements of the biblical storyline are:

- a. Creation
- b. Fall
- c. Redemption
- d. New Creation
- e. All of the above

40. Which of the following is NOT a major theme in the Bible?

- a. Kingdom
- b. Marriage
- c. Covenant
- d. Temple
- e. Worship
- f. All of these are major themes
- g. None of these are major themes

APPENDIX 2

SERMONS PREACHED JANUARY-APRIL 2021

This appendix includes the sermon rubric given to the expert panel, and the ten sermons that were preached at Brainard Avenue Baptist Church as part of seeking to develop a greater understanding of the biblical storyline and thereby increase biblical literacy.

SERMON EVALUATION RUBRIC

Teaching the Redemptive Story of the Bible to Increase Biblical Literacy at Brainard Avenue Baptist Church

Sermon number:

| 1=insufficient 2=requires attention 3=sufficient 4=exemplary | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|----------|
| Criteria | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Comments |
| The sermon is clearly relevant to the issue of biblical literacy— understanding the message of the Bible as a whole. | | | | | |
| The sermon faithfully communicates the message of this text of Scripture with sound exegesis. | | | | | |
| The sermon is theologically sound, and sufficiently includes biblical, systematic, historical, and practical theology. | | | | | |
| The Big Idea of the sermon is clearly stated. | | | | | |
| The content of the sermon clearly and logically supports the Big Idea. | | | | | |
| The sermon contains thoughtful illustrations and applications. | | | | | |
| Overall, the sermon is clearly presented. | | | | | |
| This sermon clearly helps listeners understand the message of the Bible as a whole. | | | | | |
| This sermon addresses the spiritual needs of both Christians and non-Christians. | | | | | |

Title: One Book, One Story

Text: Luke 24:13-35

FCF: We are often unsure of how to make sense of the details of the Bible.

Big idea: The Bible is one book, telling one coherent, unified story—and we as Christians must pursue a deep understanding of that story.

Date preached: January 24, 2021 (sermon **1 of 10**)

Overall goal: to establish that the Bible is a unified story.

Scripture intro:

- Please turn in your Bible to Luke 24.
- My goal for this preaching series this fall (starting today and running through about the end of March) is to help each of us develop a deeper understanding of the Bible as a whole. We could call this understanding any number of names; I have chosen to call this concept biblical literacy. I'll explain what I mean by that as we go along.
- As the first sermon in this series, this morning will serve as basically an introduction to why we as Christians need to be working to develop biblical literacy. So if it feels to you (like it does to me) that this sermon only scratches the surface, hopefully the sermon series these next few months will help us feel like we can really get our minds around this concept and begin to see it bear some fruit in our lives. We'll be talking a bit this morning about what biblical literacy is, and why we need it, and then in the weeks to come we will study passages that hopefully will help each of us continue to develop this biblical literacy, and see how one passage connects to another.
- Today we'll be reading Luke 24:13-35. This story is taking place on the Sunday after Jesus's death just a few days earlier. Two of Jesus's disciples are heartbroken and grieving that the person they thought was going to be the Messiah had been publicly crucified just a few days earlier. And now they're mystified, because they have caught word that morning that Jesus was no longer in the tomb. We're going to pick up with that in mind at v. 13.
- Let's read **Luke 24:13-35**.

Sermon intro:

- About six years ago, one of my sisters was married here in the suburbs near where our family grew up. Clarissa and I and the boys drove up here from Alabama for the wedding and enjoyed the festivities that weekend. My sister Esther married a guy from Alaska, so several of his family members had flown from there in for the weekend, and decided to stay a few extra days since they had never been to Chicago before.
- On Sunday, the day after the wedding, I was talking to a few of Caleb's relatives, and they were asking me some questions about how to get around the city on public transportation, and what they absolutely needed to see if this was the only time they would ever get to visit Chicago. They only had a few hours to do it, and it was a Sunday, so I knew getting around on the trains could be a challenge for first-time guests. So I offered to drive them around, which was an offer they quickly accepted.
- I had no doubt about where I wanted to take them—down Michigan Ave., to the Bean, to the Planetarium so they could get pictures facing back toward the skyline, and to other similar landmarks. And even though I hadn't lived here in several years at that point, I also knew how to get around well enough that we never needed to pull up a map. I don't say that to brag; most of you know the city far better than I do, so there's nothing to brag about!
- My point, though, is that because I had experience here, and I had some basic familiarity with how the city is laid out, I could move from one point to another with freedom and

confidence.

- This analogy is similar to the experience of many Christians reading the Bible. If the Bible is a city, some people are far more familiar with different parts of the city than others are. In navigating a city, some people are easily turned around; other people feel like they always know where they are and where they're going. Similarly, people studying the Bible have different levels of comfort and confidence as they read as well. But the fact is,
- **We as Christians are often unsure of how to make sense of the details of the Bible.**
- This is not a problem unique to new Christians; this is a challenge for every Christian. There are always passages that are a challenge to understand, and at times it seems there are even passages that contradict another one! What are we supposed to do with that?!
- We here at BABC want to help each of us grow in our ability to navigate our way through the Bible. In other words, we as Christians should all want to increase our biblical literacy—that's the term I'm using to summarize this concept of knowing the Bible well—we want to grow in biblical literacy so that we will glorify God with our lives, worship him wholeheartedly, and effectively serve him through Christ-centered living.
- **Definition:** At its most basic level, I am defining biblical literacy as *the ability to read the Bible accurately and draw relevant connections between one part of the Bible and another*. The biblically literate Christian can properly place the various pieces of Scripture—with their differing purposes, contexts, and genres—into the unified story of redemption that God has revealed in history and through his word.

We Need a Map

- And just like for those who are trying to get around a city, I believe that what we need to help us grow in biblical literacy is a good map. So over the next ten weeks, I'm going to try to help us fill in some details on that map.
- I believe that the map we need is a good understanding of the overarching, coherent storyline of the Bible. **We need to understand that the Bible is one book, written by one divine Author, telling one story.**
 - We all love stories. God made us that way. That's why many of us may struggle to read a dry discussion about economics or foreign policy, but most of us love to read stories about someone overcoming the odds. There's a reason people like books by Malcolm Gladwell, or Doris Kearns Goodwin, or J.K. Rowling, or Michael Lewis—they tell great stories, even if the topic initially sounds boring. The best movies are ones that have good acting, yes, but usually even more, they have a compelling plot.
 - JD Vance's book *Hillbilly Elegy* is interesting not because he gives statistics about people living in poverty in southern Ohio, but because he tells a captivating tale about what it's like to grow up in a dysfunctional home. At the beginning of the book you would never expect he would make it to study at Ohio State, or especially at Yale Law School. The story is surprising, and it's entertaining; it keeps you engaged.
- For some Christians, even hearing that the Bible is a story at all may be surprising, depending on how you were taught and the kind of preaching you grew up hearing.
- So it shouldn't be surprising that many Christians struggle to articulate the Bible's storyline or see how one passage connects to or interprets another—which again, for our purpose, is how I define biblical literacy.

- I think many of us are familiar with individual Bible stories (Noah’s flood; David & Goliath) and even their locations in the Bible, but I think most Christians struggle to identify *why* those stories are included or how they connect to the Bible’s main storyline and themes.
- But the Bible, when viewed rightly, is itself a captivating and beautiful story. Far from being a list of rules or an instruction manual for Christian living or a guide to living “the good life,” the Bible tells the most important story we could ever hear—and what’s even more amazing is that it’s the story you are living in right now. You are part of this story.

We Need to Read the Bible Rightly

One of the most important reasons we need this emphasis on biblical literacy is so that we as Christians grow in our ability to read the Bible rightly, or correctly. And that takes us back to **Luke 24**. This passage provides the *rationale* for why we need to grow in our understanding, while also giving us the *key* that unlocks the Bible’s storyline itself.

- Right as we get into this text, what we should do is stop and be encouraged at the way Jesus approaches these disciples. They are at rock bottom in discouragement. Have you been there? Are you there now?
- Jesus knew, by the power of the Holy Spirit, what these men were talking about, and knew they were cast down in their hearts. So he took the initiative toward them.
- Doesn’t that encourage you, that in your weakness, in your sorrow, in your suffering, Jesus moves toward you?
 - It’s a simple truth that Jesus is the one who approaches us and calls us to come to him for rest. That’s not the main point of this passage, but I wanted to draw our eyes to that reality, that the Lord doesn’t leave us alone in our suffering.
 - In my own moments of despair and confusion, the Lord has encouraged me that he is enough, and that he is the one who comes to me. I hope that if you are cast down, even this simple truth lifts your eyes in hope to the Lord.
- One of the questions that comes to mind when you read this passage is, how did these guys not know they were talking to Jesus? Didn’t they know him decently well, if they were disciples, what he looked like, what his voice sounded like?
- But the passage actually hints at why they couldn’t understand. V 16, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” That verb “were kept” is passive, telling us this is a divine passive. In other words, God kept them from understanding this was Jesus. I think the reason for that, in part, was for our benefit. So that they could have this conversation, so that Jesus would interpret the Bible for them, so that Luke would write it down, so that we would know how we are to rightly read the Bible.

Jesus Explains How to Read the Bible

- But the real questions for us today center on verses 25-27. This is where Jesus speaks, and where Luke tells us what Jesus did for these disciples.
- In essence, what Jesus said to these men was, “you should have seen this coming.” They should have known Jesus was going to die and then rise again for **two reasons**. **First**, Jesus told them that himself. Back in Luke 9:22, Jesus said, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priest and scribes, and be

- killed, and on the third day be raised.” So Jesus was very explicit about what was going to happen. That’s the first reason these disciples shouldn’t have been surprised.
- The **second** reason they shouldn’t have been surprised is because of what Jesus explains in v. 25-27. He says that the Old Testament was abundantly clear that the Messiah would suffer before entering his glory—before being crowned as the King they expected.
 - In saying this, Jesus clearly instructs us on how we read the Bible. He was referring to the Old Testament, but it certainly applies to our reading of the NT as well.
 - If every passage either anticipates the gospel, or describes the gospel, or explains the implications of the gospel, then Christians must learn to see that reality on every page of the Bible. This is precisely the way Jesus read Scripture himself, and spoke about Scripture (Luke 24:13-35). The apostles who wrote the NT followed suit and teach us to read the OT the same way.
 - Every passage we read in some way connects to the gospel. It may be exposing our need for the gospel. It may be providing a picture of the gospel. Or it may be showing how we should live out the realities of the gospel (such as forgiveness from sin, having a clear conscience, or loving difficult people).

V 25

- When Jesus says these men are “foolish . . . and slow of heart,” what he’s describing is our natural condition when we read the Bible. We actually need the grace of God to read the Bible well, and we need it to want to read the Bible.
- That’s why, if you’re here as someone today who wouldn’t identify as a Christian, I totally understand if you’re sitting here saying, “why in the world would I want to spend time developing biblical literacy?” It’s not natural for us to read the Bible rightly; we need help to understand what we’re reading. And Jesus is alluding to that human weakness when he calls them foolish and slow of heart.
- He says what they have done is failed “to believe all that the prophets have spoken!” In other words, the OT is filled with predictions of what would happen to the Messiah. These predictions were through explicit statements, such as in Isaiah 53, but also through what we call types, which are essentially pictures of what “typically” happens, what is a “typical” pattern.

V 26

- Jesus expands on that idea in v. 26. He says it was necessary for the Christ, or the Messiah, to “suffer these things.” What things? Everything Jesus had gone through. The beatings, the taunting, the scourging, and the dying itself.
- It was only after he “suffered these things” that he would “enter into his glory.” Again, that’s a way of saying that the Bible lays out a consistent pattern that it is only after suffering that God’s people receive the crown of life. It was that way for Job, for Joseph, for Moses, for David, for Isaiah and Jeremiah; and it was no different for Jesus.

V 27

- In v 27, Luke explains for us what Jesus did next. He summarizes in one sentence what may have taken Jesus several miles of walking to do.
- Jesus began at Moses. That’s not just with the person Moses, though surely Jesus used his name, but it’s with all that Moses wrote, the first five books of the OT.
- After Moses, Jesus taught from “all the prophets” as well. From the way our English Bibles are laid out, we might think that means he jumped to Isaiah and taught through Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and then the twelve minor prophets.

- But as you've heard many times here, the OT was divided up differently in the Hebrew Bible. After the books of Moses came the Prophets, which included Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings; and then it proceeded from there to Isaiah and the rest of what we usually think of with the Prophets.
- The rest of the OT is called the "writings," which Jesus alludes to as "the Psalms" in v. 44. So here in v. 27, what Luke is telling us is that Jesus walked through the entire OT with these men and showed them over and over again that the OT clearly foretold what the Messiah would do and suffer here on earth.
- Luke explicitly says that later in v 27: "he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures."
- What did he interpret? "The things concerning himself." So what did that include? What might Jesus have shown them to make this so clear to them?
- There are many books written just about this subject, but let me just kind of help you dip your toe into the pool with a few possibilities.

Jesus in the OT

- Serpent-crushing seed
- Passover Lamb
- Temple
- Prophet, priest, king
- Suffering servant
- Good shepherd
- Serpent lifted up on a pole
- Ruler holding a rod of iron
- New Adam, new Moses, new David

We Should Read the Bible This Way

- What I'm saying is that yes, the whole Bible is communicating the message of the gospel. The OT is the gospel promised, and the NT is the gospel revealed.
- We need to read the whole Bible with Christian eyes. In other words, if a Jewish person were sitting with you listening to you explain a passage in a Bible study, he or she should not be able to affirm all that you say, even if you are teaching from a Psalm, for instance.
- But it takes time to develop these Bible-reading instincts. It takes reading the Bible, and re-reading it, in large chunks.
- And I think, it helps to have a map. It helps to have a tour guide. And over the next few months, we will try to provide you with that map to help you navigate through the Bible confidently.

Conclusion:

- In his book *Essentialism*, author Greg McKeown relates the story of a high school journalism professor who was teaching his students the importance of not just knowing facts, but getting at the meaning of the facts and making connections between them. McKeown relates that the professor gave his students an assignment to **write the lead sentence** for an article in the school paper at a local high school.
- The scenario the professor gives the students to write about is that their high school has announced the entire faculty will travel to a nearby city for a seminar on new teaching methods next Thursday, and he provides details about who will be speaking, where it will be held, and so on. The students then set off to craft their articles, and all of them come up with a similar story that explains that the teachers will be attending the event on Thursday, lists the names of the speakers at the event, states the name of the venue and

the time it will begin. The teacher read through the drafts from his students and then set them aside.

- He told them they were all wrong. The lead of the story is, there will be no school on Thursday.
 - The journalism students were so caught up in stating the facts of the story that they never realized the meaning behind the fact that if all of the teachers will be at a required event, there will be no school that day.
 - One of the students in that class that day said, “I realized that journalism was not just about regurgitating the facts but about figuring out the point. It wasn’t enough to know the who, what, when, and where; you had to understand what it meant. And why it mattered.” (McKeown 73-74)
 - I think this story illustrates the way many Christians read the Bible. Most of us know the facts, and even love the facts. We can tell someone what happens in a story like David & Goliath or Nadab & Abihu or Gideon’s fleece. But we zoom so far in on the details sometimes, that we actually don’t really have any idea why that story is in the Bible or what it should teach us. In other words, many of us Christians have lots of Bible knowledge, but struggle to be biblically literate. The solution, I believe, will be for us to grow in our understanding of the map that is the storyline of the Bible.
-
- For the person struggling to move from one point in the Bible to another, or to get from what is seemingly a small alleyway (a less-familiar passage) to a major highway (the gospel message), a well-developed understanding of the storyline of the Bible provides the surest and smoothest path. The categories of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation saturate every book and genre of Scripture, and help us put together that map. Nothing can replace the time and effort that are required to develop well-worn paths to the Bible’s thoroughfares.
 - May the Lord give us grace to desire and develop this skill, and may he give us the joy that comes from knowing his word as the priceless treasure that it is.

Title: Reading the Bible Like the Apostles

Text: Acts 3:1-26

FCF: Sinners in a fallen world are hesitant to believe in a supernatural God.

Big idea: Jesus, the promised Messiah, brings in God's kingdom and offers forgiveness to all those who turn to him in repentant faith.

Date preached: February 7, 2021 (sermon **2 of 10**)

Author's aim: to persuade his readers that Jesus the Messiah continues his work through the power of his Spirit.

Overall goal: to demonstrate that the Apostles learned to read the Bible as a unified story about Christ.

Scripture intro:

- Please turn in your Bible to the book of Acts, chapter 3.
- I trust all of you have received one of the sermon cards on the table in the entryway, which lays out how this series will proceed over the next few months. In case you don't have one yet, and weren't here last week, in short, we're looking at how the Bible is one book that tells one unified story of redemption. We're studying this subject together out of a desire for our congregation to continue to develop biblical literacy—or in simple terms, the ability to read the Bible well.
- Today we'll be reading Acts 3 in its entirety. This story involves two of Jesus's apostles, Peter and John, entering the temple shortly after the monumental day of Pentecost. As they arrived at the temple, they encounter a man who they had very possibly seen before. They stop and address him. Let's **read the text, Acts 3**, to see what happens next.

Sermon intro:

- Seven years ago, a University of Chicago professor named Nicholas Epley wrote a book called "Mindwise: Why We Misunderstand What Others Think, Believe, Feel, and Want." It has some interesting portions in it, but by and large, about five years after reading it, the only part that stands out to me about the book is that he is atheistic in his explanation of the world. He personally struggles to understand people like us—who go to a common building every Sunday morning to sing songs to a God we've never seen, who trust in him to provide us forgiveness from "sins," which are what most people consider to be normal human actions and reactions, and who even give our money to people and organizations who go all over the world convincing other people to believe what we believe.
- Because we can't see God, or scientifically prove the existence of God, he concludes that those of us who seek to "walk by faith" are really just sadly misguided people.
- At one point in his book he writes, "When a hurricane strikes *your* hometown with unusual force and catastrophic consequences, it's just the kind of capricious catastrophe that requires an explanation, something that might trigger you to think . . . about the mind of a god. After a similar trigger hit the small island of Haiti—in this case, a devastating earthquake in 2010—Haitians also flocked to God. 'A lot of people who never prayed or believed—now they believe,' said a twenty-four-year-old clerk, Cristina Bailey. From a self-appointed preacher at a refugee camp: 'We have to kneel down and ask forgiveness from God.' It is surely no accident that such natural occurrences are often referred to as 'acts of God.' A normal, mundane, exactly-as-expected day does not trigger thoughts of a divine mind." (75-76)
- The passage in front of us, Acts 3, records for us the opposite of "a normal, mundane, exactly-as-expected day." Rather, this passage describes what was for one man a completely life-altering day, and it likely was life-altering for many others who were in

or near the temple in Jerusalem on that day as well.

- I don't know how Nicholas Epley would reconcile what this passage says with his definition of reality, but I'm sure he would consider it fanciful and perhaps even damaging.
- I mention this book and Epley's perspective on faith (of which the quote I read is just a sample) as a way of reminding us that sinners in a fallen world are hesitant to believe in a supernatural God.
- The passage in front of us forces us to reckon with this issue, because it makes claims about God that are incompatible with the perspective of the world that Epley espouses. It reminds us that everyone walks by faith in someone or something, even if it is their faith in a naturalistic worldview.
- Some might have assumed that when Jesus ascended to heaven some weeks after his resurrection from the dead, that his ministry would come to an end. But what we learn in the early part of Acts is that the opposite is true. He sent the Holy Spirit, as Jesus had repeatedly promised, and the Spirit continued the ministry of Jesus the Messiah, particularly through the apostles. This passage is in our Bible to show us that fact particularly—that the apostles continued the ministry of Jesus in the Spirit's power.
- In our passage today, we see that

Jesus, the promised Messiah, brings in God's kingdom and offers forgiveness to all those who turn to him in repentant faith.

- In this passage, he's doing that specifically through his apostles Peter and John, but it makes the same point as many passages in the gospel of Luke (written by the same author as this book of Acts), in which Jesus was working visibly in the midst of the people he was healing and forgiving.
- As we'll see as we move along, what Peter was working to show in particular was that Jesus is in fact the anticipated Messiah. He was doing all that the Jewish people expected their redeemer to do. And the way the apostles brought this home for their preaching audiences was by tying what Jesus did with what the OT predicted over and over again.

The passage has three fairly straight-forward sections.

- In V 1-11, Peter heals a lame man
- In V 12-16, Peter preaches Jesus: "Jesus, whom you killed, is the one who healed this man"
- And in V 17-26, Peter calls for repentance and faith in Jesus

Let's walk through this passage together, and at the end I'll explain why this passage is pertinent to our subject of the storyline of the Bible and our desire as Christians to develop biblical literacy. In other words, how it helps us all read our Bibles well.

1-10: Peter heals a man who could not walk

- The passage begins simply enough with two of Jesus's apostles going up to the temple in Jerusalem to pray. On their way in, they encounter a man who they may have seen many times before. It seems this man, who was born with some kind of handicap that kept him from walking, was at the gate of the temple every day, because people carried him there. Why would they take him there? Well, let's just think of a pre-COVID world in which crowds congregated, and imagine that you want to put yourself in a place where people will be generous toward you financially. Are you going to be better off at a random street corner, or at the temple, where in theory people would be generous because of their

- professed love for God and neighbor? This man assumed the temple was the place to be.
- He probably had no idea who Peter and John were; hundreds or possibly thousands of people passed by him every day, so in his mind they were just two more potential candidates for giving him a few coins. So when he asked them for money and they stopped and told him to look up at them, he was probably simply expecting a nice-sized donation.
 - Instead, as v. 6 recounts, Peter tells him he doesn't actually have any money to give at all.
 - Application: Notice, as a good example for us, Peter didn't discount the importance of helping people with physical needs. We want to help people as we can when they are hungry and needy, out of love for God and for people made in his image. When we have opportunity, we should help people get a meal or fill up their gas tank or find a shelter. But we also need to remember that people have deeper needs, far longer-lasting needs, than food or clothing. And that's what Peter was most concerned about.
 - Christ is your greatest need, and he's the greatest need of everyone else you talk to as well.
 - Peter may not have money to give; he can, however, give something that the man never expected. Maybe he day-dreamed about it, but certainly never expected it would happen.
 - Peter reached out his hand, took the right hand of the man sitting on the ground, and pulled him up by his feet. Peter did this "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth," a man that surely this man had heard of and perhaps had even seen over the previous years. By saying "in the name," he means "in the authority of" Jesus.
 - And just like that, for the first time in his life, this man was standing on his own two feet, and picked up one foot and put it in front of the other. He didn't even need months of physical therapy! Can you imagine the look on his face, and the sound in his voice, and the joy in his step, at that moment?!
 - V 8 tells us he was doing three activities: walking, leaping, and praising. He was quickly making full use of those once dead legs, and he paired the enthusiasm of his legs with the enthusiasm of his voice, shouting praise to the only one who can give power for such miracles—God himself.
 - When was the last time you were so grateful for what God was doing in your life that you couldn't help but talk about it? While many people around us are complaining, we can be meditating on how faithful God has been to us, and praise him for it. And if we're one of the ones complaining with the others around us, that's something for which we need to repent and ask for God's forgiveness. When we complain, we are actually exposing what we believe about God—that he is not good at all times.
 - The crowd around him, both inside and outside of the temple, saw him and recognized him as the handicapped guy they passed every day. The guy they felt guilty walking by, the way we feel guilty and look the other way when we see a homeless person asking for help at a street corner. They had seen him so many times they knew exactly who he was, and you have to think there were looks of utter shock on people all around.
 - Remember a few weeks ago, we said from Luke 2 that Luke has a habit of colorfully expressing the reactions and emotions of people. In v. 10, the people were "filled with wonder and amazement." In v. 11 they were "utterly astounded."
 - These are the expressions you expect to see when someone watches a stunning magic trick, or someone pulls off a stunt that no one expects. A few months ago I was at a park with our boys, and I was standing to the side keeping an eye on them while they played. Off to my left about 30 feet or so, three teenage guys were hanging out together, and I was watching them when all of a sudden one of

the three guys leapt into the air and performed a perfect backflip. Unfortunately for him, none of the other guys were looking at him when he did it. But as soon as he landed his feet on the ground, he put his hands on his head, gasped, and said, “I did it! I did a backflip!” And the other guys turned around and said, “what? How?” It was humorous to watch. Thankfully the other guys believed him right away, or I would have had to go over to vouch for him that what he was saying was true. I saw it with my own eyes. It was perfect form, with a perfect landing, but it was evidently the first one this guy had ever done, which is why he was so surprised. But even if I didn’t see it because I was looking the other direction, I would have believed him, because the way he put his hands on top of his head, the look of unbelief in his eyes, and the sound of his voice all communicated that something shocking had just happened, something that he did not expect to go as well as it did.

- That’s probably how many people that day in the temple responded. This would have raised major questions—how did this happen? Who caused this? Was he faking it all these years? We are witnesses to a miracle!

12-16: Peter preaches Jesus

- 12: Peter is a good preacher—he doesn’t miss an opportunity to address a captivated audience. What he does first is dispel the myth that this man jumping around over here was healed because of something inherently special in the apostles themselves. It seems the people were gaping and staring in wonder.
- 13: So first he says “let me tell you who did *not* do this.” Then he says, “now I’ll tell you how this happened.” And he does so by means of a history lesson, but a bit of a pointed history lesson at that. It’s also a very theological history lesson, which we’ll look at a bit more closely later on.
 - Peter goes all the way back to the book of Genesis to tell these Israelites in Jerusalem that the eternal God, whom they have worshiped for thousands of years, is the one who raised Jesus from the dead. He calls Jesus God’s “servant,” a likely allusion to the book of Isaiah, probably even specifically Isa. 53.
 - If hearing this man talk about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and then Isaiah, made this audience feel good, those warm and fuzzy feelings disappeared in a hurry when Peter lays out the facts from less than two months before: you killed Jesus. You denied him. The authorities were going to let him go, but you asked for a murderer to be released rather than this man that you considered a blasphemous lunatic. But that man, Jesus, is the one who gave this man perfect health right before your very eyes.
- That’s a summary of v. 12-16. Basically Peter said, if you think what just happened here is amazing, maybe you should have rethought your response to Jesus these past few years. Maybe crucifying him wasn’t such a hot idea after all.

17-26: Peter offers repentance in Jesus

- Again, as a good preacher, Peter isn’t content to just lay out the facts. There’s a difference between being a conveyor belt of information, and preaching. Preaching applies divine truth to human hearts. That’s what Peter does now.
- 17: The term “brothers” reminds us of “men of Israel” in v. 12. He’s addressing a specific crowd of his fellow Israelites. He acknowledges that these people “acted in ignorance.”
 - Kind of like the Bears when they traded up to draft Mitch Trubisky over Patrick Mahomes. You know, you thought you had a good idea, but maybe you should have listened to some other opinions first.

- 18: Even so, ignorance or not, what you did fulfilled what God said through the prophets, that the Messiah, the Christ, would suffer.
- 19: Peter now brings this whole event to a decision point: repent and turn to God. We preach the same gospel message here that Peter preached there. God made you, you rebelled against him, so turn to Christ for forgiveness. What's astonishing is that even the very people who were screaming for Jesus to die could be forgiven, not just for their sins in general but for those very sins of killing Jesus!
 - CityAlight, a group of musicians in Australia whose songs we occasionally sing, captures this truth in one song, in which they write: "See the king who made the sun, and the moon and shining stars, let the soldiers hold and nail him down so that he could save them." That's amazing grace!
- Application: Jesus offered forgiveness even to the very people who called for his death and brought it to pass. If he can forgive those people, we should stop and consider, who are we unwilling to forgive? And we need to remember, no one has sinned against us as much as we have sinned against the Lord.
 - Robert Jones, a Christian counselor, writes in his tremendous book "Pursuing Peace" that based on Matthew 18, "God's forgiveness of our massive sin debt should compel us to show the same mercy to others. God's forgiveness of us serves as our motive (we forgive *because* he forgave us) and our *model* (we forgive in the way he forgave us) for forgiving others." (p. 131)
- The rest of Peter's sermon is filled with allusions to the OT. He described that Jesus is
 - God's servant in v 13 (an allusion to Isa. 53)
 - Holy and Righteous One in v 14 (a reference to the deity of Christ based on him being the Son of God)
 - Author of life in v 15 (the one who created life, and who brings resurrection life)
 - God foretold he would suffer 18
 - (Where? In passages like Psalm 22, in the pattern of suffering in David's life, etc.)
 - Will "be sent"/come again to restore all things, as God spoke through prophets 20-21
 - Where? In places like Isaiah 11, Isaiah 65, and in countless others texts
 - Prophet like Moses in v 22-23 (Deut. 18:15, 18)
 - All prophets proclaimed these days 24
 - Where? As one example, Samuel saw a day when a true champion, a son of David, would come to defeat the true enemy, like Goliath, and crush his head, as David cut off Goliath's head, in fulfillment of Genesis 3:15.
 - What are "times of refreshing"? I believe this is a way of referring to the idyllic way the OT describes a return to Eden-like conditions, where plants will blossom and rivers will flow and the lion will lie down with the lamb and there will be no danger, no death, no disease, no sin.
- 26: Peter returns to this theme of turning back to God from wickedness in v. 26. We turn to Jesus, whom God raised from the dead—the same idea Peter included in v. 13 and v. 15. We turn to God, from sin. We can't hold hands with God with one hand and hold hands with our sin in the other hand. Repentance is not a one-time decision that we make when we hear a stirring sermon. It's a daily part of the Christian life, learning to see the ugliness and emptiness of sin while beholding the glory of Christ in the Bible.
 - If you are here as someone exploring Christianity, or just casually observing to see what Christians believe, or maybe you're here because one of our members invited you, we hope you will hear this sermon from Peter and realize that you,

too, need to repent. You didn't personally call for Jesus to be killed in Jerusalem as these people in the passage did, but you have rebelled against him nonetheless. So we urge you to repent and believe that Jesus is the only way to salvation from your rebellion against God. If you would like to talk about that, when the service is over, we hope you'll just catch the person down the row from you and let them answer any questions you have.

Why Did This Happen?

- Now, let's go back to the part of this passage where Peter heals this man—or to be more precise, where the Lord heals this man through the apostle Peter. And let's just ask the question, why did that happen? Why did Jesus and the apostles work such miracles in peoples' lives? Was it just to be nice to this man? Obviously not. It was nice, to be sure; I'm sure the man really appreciated being able to walk. But we have to say, something bigger was going on here. And of course, the same could be said about any other miracles Jesus and the apostles did—feeding the 5,000, raising Lazarus from the dead, and so on.
- The bigger picture behind what was going on with these miracles was that Jesus was bringing God's kingdom to earth. Jesus was rolling back the curtains to show us what it looks like to live in a “new creation” kind of world. Jesus didn't come to just make our lives on earth easier and more convenient; in fact, for most Christians, that is far from their honest experience.
- Theologians often describe the era that we live in as the “already/not yet.” God's kingdom has already begun, but it is not fully here. It is inaugurated—it has begun, as a presidency begins at the inauguration—but it is not completed. So the Lord worked this miracle through Peter's ministry to show people what it looks like to have life in God's perfect kingdom.
 - Look at v. 8—the healed man was “walking, and leaping, and praising God.” That word “leaping” takes us back to Isaiah 35, where we have a picture of the new creation. Isa. 35:5-6 reads, “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.”
 - Can you picture other miracles Jesus and the apostles accomplished? They made blind people see, deaf people hear, mute people talk, and here, lame people leap. That's exactly what this man was doing. The Greek word that Luke used to describe what that man did is the same word we have in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. It was originally written in Hebrew, but then even before Jesus and the apostles, it was translated to Greek. And if Luke had a Greek translation of the OT, he would have seen the same word in Isa. 35:6 that he used here. I'm convinced that's why he used that word—he was saying, the realities of Isa. 35 have already begun. They aren't completed yet; they won't be until Jesus returns. But New Creation realities have begun.

That's the point of this passage: **Jesus, the promised Messiah, brings in God's kingdom and offers forgiveness to all those who turn to him in repentant faith.**

Pulling it All Together

- Church what I'm saying is that this passage shows us that Jesus, the promised Messiah, brings in God's kingdom and offers forgiveness to all those who turn to him in repentant faith.
- But what I'm saying then by way of application is that the apostles clearly learned to read their Bibles as a unified story about the person and work of Christ. They got the lesson

from Luke 24, that we looked at last week, that all of history is about the redemption God provides through Jesus.

- I made a list of at least eleven other examples in Acts, besides this one in Acts 3, that bears this idea out, that the apostles got it. They heard what Jesus said in Luke 24, and they went back to their Bibles and they put the pieces together. No longer was the Bible just about Israel's history or the nature of God; it was a unified story about God bringing forgiveness and times of refreshing through his son Jesus.
- The apostles rightly read and interpreted the OT scriptures as all pointing toward Jesus, giving us a model of how to read the Bible ourselves

Applications:

- Read and re-read large passages of your Bible, rather than just bite-sized chunks
- Read books as a tour guide to the Bible—perhaps a good study Bible or “What is Biblical Theology” by Jim Hamilton
- Memorize Luke 24:27
- See yourself as part of the story (Vickers, *Acts*, 316-17)

Conclusion:

This unit in the book of Acts, about Jesus as the one who brings in God's kingdom and calls us all to repent and believe the gospel, relates to our subject of “biblical literacy” by showing that the apostles understood that Jesus is at the heart of all of Scripture. We should read the Bible in the same way.

- The apostles had grown up reading the OT over and over. They knew the lay of the land, the nature of God, and had expectations of who the Messiah would be and what he would do. But somewhere along the way they had missed seeing what had been there all along. (Optical illusions) They had not understood what they were reading.
- But once the apostles saw Jesus in the OT as a result of the experience on Emmaus Road, they couldn't un-see him. It affected their preaching and writing from then on. It should ours too.

Because the apostles rightly read the OT as all pointing toward Christ, you too must read Scripture as a unified story in the same way. Let's pray and ask for grace to learn this skill.

Title: The Very Good Beginning

Text: Genesis 1, various texts

FCF: Our lives are full of uncertainties.

Big idea: God is the creator and sustainer of all things. Trust in him completely!

Date preached: February 14, 2021 (sermon **3 of 10**)

Overall goal: to show that creation is the loving, wise, delightful act of God in which he took great pleasure and received great glory.

Scripture intro:

- Please take your Bible and turn to the first page, Genesis 1.
- We are still early on in our sermon series on the storyline of the Bible. We're seeing that while the Bible contains many smaller stories, they are together telling one overarching story. What I've sought to do at this point has been to show that this is the right way to read the Bible, and it's what Jesus and the biblical authors modeled for us. Today we look at the beginning of the story: the creation of the world by the direct act of God.
- It may not seem like this doctrine is all that important once we get past these opening pages. But it's actually quite remarkable how often the biblical authors come back to this doctrine again and again. We'll see some examples of that along the way.
- Let's read **Genesis 1** together, down through chapter 2:3.

Sermon intro:

- A few weeks ago, I was in our house reading when the silence was broken by a blood-curdling scream from our basement. I stood up to walk to the top of the basement stairs to see what was going on, but I actually didn't have time to go down before Grant, our 7 year old, was already at the top of the stairs, still screaming. Turns out there was a very large spider in our basement, which by his estimates were the size of about a large Reese's cup. I didn't discount what he said, because I remember similar spiders in our family's basement when I was a child a few miles from here, and having a similar reaction.
- But what made all the difference for Grant? What allowed him to relax and get back to his Legos? The only difference was knowing that I was looking for the spider and was going to deal with it somehow. It was immediately comforting to him that someone bigger was on the job.
- We live in an uncertain world, a place filled with scary creatures like spiders, yes, but also filled with scary circumstances and an untold number of scary questions. What will happen with my health? My job? My money? My home? My children? Our country?
- The reality is, our lives are full of uncertainties, and we all have fears of what could happen, or about what has already happened, and is still happening.

- The people of God in the OT had a lot of uncertainties as well. In the case of the first readers of Genesis, they were about to go conquer land that God had promised to them, but didn't know what the future held. So how did Moses shepherd those people? By telling them their story. And to do that, Moses saw fit to start at the beginning of the story.

- You see, God wanted his people back then to know a very important truth, and he wants you to know the same truth today. The truth this chapter provides wasn't a generic "creation is good," though that's true. I think what's actually more important was to see what the passage teaches about God. This chapter isn't just about creation. It's about the creator. The truth we need today, amidst all the questions swirling around us, is that **God is the powerful creator. Since that's true, you can trust wholeheartedly in him.**
- Everyone eventually asks questions like, "where did we come from? Why are we here?" These are significant questions, and the Bible answers them.
- On many Sundays we affirm together the Apostles' Creed. What is the first line? "I believe in God, the father Almighty, **creator of heaven and earth.**" Christianity doesn't start with "Jesus died on the cross." It begins with, "God made everything."
- As we see here in Genesis 1, the story of the Bible begins at the very beginning of time and history. These opening statements in the Bible set the trajectory for everything that will come later. The Bible's story doesn't happen in a vacuum. It happens in a real place in real time with real people.
- This sermon focuses especially on the God of creation. Next week focuses especially on the goal of creation—what God was aiming at by making the earth and putting people in a garden.
- First and foremost, though, creation teaches us that the world is God's stage, and history is his story. He is the main actor, and that's true in the story as a whole and in every individual story we read. So what does this first passage in the Bible teach us about God? It teaches a lot, but we will especially focus on two aspects of his character.

I. God is perfectly sovereign

To be sovereign means he rules over everything. We see him ruling throughout this chapter, even in the way he created.

A. He created everything by his word alone

- Eleven times in this chapter, Moses tells us that God spoke to create. And he "creates" out of nothing (v. 1)—he didn't need material to fashion. He just spoke, and what he said happened. His work is portrayed as being effortless.
- This is almost never the case for me. A few weeks ago Clarissa told me, "the washer isn't draining." In a question not too many days before that, she asked, "do you know where all our masks are disappearing to?" I didn't realize initially that these statements could be related. After taking the washer apart, it turns out five or six masks had lodged themselves in our washer's drain filter. Thankfully I was able to solve both of those problems in one fell swoop, finding the masks and making the washer drain. But unfortunately, it took me several hours to take the washer apart, pry the masks out of the drain, and put it all back together again.
- Granted, that's fixing something, not creating something out of nothing. But my point is, for us as humans, we often have to exert tremendous effort and energy. Genesis 1 gives us no indication that God was straining to make everything. All he did was speak, and it was done.

- He made everything, and therefore controls everything. He did not just set the earth in motion and then take his hands off. He is sovereignly ruling in every detail of the universe.
 - To many people in our society, this is not only a stupid idea, this is a dangerous idea. It is undeniable, they claim, that humans have been around for hundreds of thousands of years, out of the 4 billion years of history.
 - If you'd like to study the issue of how science and the Bible relate, there are lots of options for you. That's not what we're going to do here, at all. There are Christians who understand the age of the earth differently, for instance, but still take Genesis 1-2 just as seriously for understanding the rest of the Bible.
 - If you'd like to explore this issue a little more, you can read a chapter on this subject in a book called "Confronting Christianity" by Rebecca McLaughlin. She addresses this issue from the angle that science doesn't disprove Christianity.

1. What he says has total authority

- One of the reasons he has such authority is that he is self-existent (1)—there was no need for Moses to stop to explain God's origins, because he has none.
 - There never was a time when God was not, though there was a time when the universe was not.

2. What he says deserves your devotion

- If what he says is so authoritative and powerful, and the Bible is a record of what he has said, then we must listen (through reading his word) and obey what his word says. Even more, we must reframe our thinking to match his, not just ignore what he says when it conflicts with what we wish were true.
 - He wants you to know him, and to be comforted by him. He also wants you to remember that he rules over all. Psalm 115 says he does in the heavens whatever he pleases. He has always existed and you have not.

B. He created everything in perfect detail

1. He has designed both the beginning and the end

- This chapter begins with the words, "In the beginning." That implies there is also an end. History is moving along, ordained by God, with purpose and direction.
- He is the author of history, and he continues to providentially bring his plans to pass.

- We need to be honest about what this means. It means he rules over who our president is, and what that president does. It means he doesn't feel intimidated by Vladimir Putin. It means you are where you are because of his plan.
- Let's put it this way: college students, if you're just waiting for the day you'll get married and can't imagine ever being able to be satisfied until that happens, God knows your concern about that. In his sovereignty, he's not going to let you miss "the one."
- It means that when you have a job interview, if he wants you to get that job, you'll get it. Of course, you should be fully prepared for your interview and honor the Lord through using your gifts and talents even in that conversation. I've said before, Christians should be the best employees. I think we can also say, Christians should be the best interviewees.
- But we who trust in God's sovereignty don't need to live with our stomach tied in knots! We can work hard, pursue godly relationships, and trust God as we put one foot in front of the other each day.
- Believing in "good luck" doesn't fit this paradigm. When someone says it to me, I understand it to mean "we hope everything works well for you," just like saying "God bless you" when you sneeze means "I'm sorry you sneezed."
- But we as Christians know that a biblical worldview excludes "luck." When we have bad situations in our lives, like when someone else gets the job you wanted, it's not because you have bad luck. It's because God is providentially ordering creation in a way that is different than you perhaps would have chosen for yourself.
 - Gospel call to unbelievers: Perhaps this kind of thinking is jarring to some you. If you're not a Christian (or haven't been a Christian for very long), I don't expect this kind of explanation to be easy for you to swallow. It's a counter-message to what our society teaches us to believe. But I would say to you, if this is true, as the Bible lays out for us, it changes everything about how we view reality.
 - Reality is that God made us, we rebelled against him, and because of that we deserve judgment. But thankfully, Jesus took that judgment upon himself so that we can be forgiven. We're forgiven when we turn from our sin and believe that Jesus is the only one who can take the judgment we deserve for our sin.
 - If you would like to talk about that, I'd love to talk to you after the service, or get together with you for coffee or lunch later in the week. I know many of our members would love that as well, so just catch whomever you can after the service today.

2. He has given each person a role to fulfill

- You have been made in God's image (26-27), so you have a purpose for being on earth. We'll talk about this in more detail next week.

- But we can at least say, as a person made in God’s image, you are the crown of God’s creation. People are the best part of what God made.
 - Being in his image means several things: you have a mind, a will, and emotions. It means you have the capacity for relationship with him and with other creatures. And it means you are immortal (your soul will live somewhere forever).
 - You are dignified, regardless of your age or background or nationality. This is why euthanasia, abortion, murder, and simple hatred for another person is so wicked.
 - Every person you meet is made in God’s image, which calls us to give dignity and honor to all people.
 - Illustration: Some of you will remember the story of the gorilla, named Harambe, at the Cincinnati Zoo in 2016. A three year old boy fell into the gorilla enclosure. As the parent of a child who has loved to climb everything he sees since before he could walk, this story terrifies me. But people were livid that a beautiful animal was put down at the expense of a boy who fell into the animal’s area. People were confused about which of those two creatures had the most worth. It’s not that Harambe wasn’t a beautiful gorilla. And yes, his species is endangered. So it’s not that we as people who believe in a creation mandate should just throw up our hands about taking care of all God has made. The difference is that the 3 year old boy is made in God’s image. That boy has a soul that will live forever. The zookeepers realized that only one of these creatures would come out of that situation alive, and they were actually heroic in saving that boy’s life.
 - And that’s because in God’s perfect sovereignty, he made mankind in his image.

So Genesis 1 shows us that God is perfectly sovereign. He can do whatever he wants. He is unlimited in power, and he is accountable to no one else.

Secondly, this passage shows us that . . .

II. God is perfectly wise

This part of the sermon will be significantly shorter than the last part, and then we’ll look at some ways creation affects our lives.

The alternative to God being perfectly wise is that the universe has parts that are not as they should be. That’s simply not the case. The beauty of a new LEGO set is that all the parts work together just right. That’s how creation was. When God looked at what he made, he didn’t need a mulligan. He put the earth exactly the distance it should be from the sun. He didn’t need to tinker around till he figured it out. All the pieces fit together as they should.

- God saw that everything he made was good (v 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31).

- The physical world is a gift—God has given us good things to enjoy richly. He could have made the only edible food taste like unadulterated oatmeal. Instead we have juicy steak and fresh corn on the cob and juicy peaches and black coffee and cinnamon rolls. Not necessarily at the same meal, but we don't judge.
- The world is beautiful and orderly.
 - The four seasons are one way of seeing that God is infinitely creative. He also made an amazing diversity of plants, animals, birds, and fish. If you've ever gone swimming in the Great Barrier Reef, or walked through a botanical garden in late spring, or gone searching for owls on a winter night, you know what I'm talking about. The world is a glorious place, because God is himself glorious.
 - Jonathan Edwards, likely the greatest American theologian who lived about 250 years ago, loved to walk through the woods looking at spider webs. I am reading the children's classic *Charlotte's Web* to our boys these days, and the fact that spiders can spell "radiant" is amazing. 😊
 - Another example of the beauty of creation in the way God made squirrels is available to you in a YouTube video called "Squirrel Ninja Course."

The Whole Bible is about Creation

So why does it matter that the Bible starts with creation?

- It could seem to some Christians that the story of creation is nice for us to teach to children and is a logical starting point for the Bible, but it is relatively unimportant for most Christians. I hope this sermon will help us correct that possible way of thinking.
- One of the ways we know creation is such an important part of the Bible's story is that it's not just talked about at the beginning of Genesis and then left alone. Rather, Moses himself comes back to it again and again throughout his five books. We know the NT does this a lot, but even the OT authors are regularly interacting with previous biblical revelation. Sometimes they quote it; sometimes they simply assume it and expand on it.
- After Moses, the rest of the biblical authors also tap into this beginning of the story time and again. For instance, the psalms and prophets repeatedly meditate on creation. Paul teaches from creation about ten times, especially in Romans and 1 Corinthians. Even the book of Revelation at the very end of the Bible refers to creation several times. As we'll see in later sermons, the way Revelation ends makes our minds go back to Genesis 1-3 in a variety of ways. If creation is unimportant for us, the biblical authors failed to realize that!

Implications of Creation

What are some of the ways creation helps us as Christians? Let me briefly touch on five implications.

- Evangelism: Faithfully tell the gospel to sinners
 - We compel people to submit to God because they are made by God

- This is why “2 Ways to Live” begins with creation, not the cross. Once again, the Bible begins with “in the beginning,” not “Jesus died on the cross.” God wrote it that way on purpose.
 - People won’t think our message of salvation matters if they assume they are not accountable to God. That doesn’t mean we have to start every gospel conversation with unbelievers with an explanation of creation, but we at least need to operate out of that framework ourselves and press upon them the reality that God is the judge and they will give an account to him.
- Sexuality: submit to God’s good intentions
 - I urge you, don’t bow to the world’s message that gender is a cultural construct. This was a distinction created by God from the beginning. Creation is full of distinctions: God & creation; mankind and the rest of creation; male and female. All of these distinctions matter, and when we start erasing any one of them, we are destined for big problems.
 - I appreciate the way our brother [one of our members] Christopher Yuan discusses the importance of creation in his book “Holy Sexuality and the Gospel.”
- Work: use your energy and talents as a way of honoring God’s creativity
 - We work because “God is . . . a creative, competent, efficient, caring worker, whose work provides for others, blesses others, meets the needs of others, and makes life possible for them.” (Jim Hamilton, *Work and Our Labor in the Lord*, 19)
- Family worship: teach your children a Christian worldview
 - By regularly having a time in which a family sits down together to be exposed to the word of God together, we are then able to shape our minds (and particularly our children’s minds, who are so easily influenced as youngsters) to think God’s thoughts after him. Nearly every source outside of our homes is teaching our children to think about the world from a naturalistic perspective. We as Christian families need to stand up to that, and we do that both at set times and just in every day conversations.
- Humility: cultivate a posture of submission to God in every part of your life.
 - Those who seek fame and glory for themselves are imposters. Pride is disgusting, because it is stealing credit when you actually deserve none.

Conclusion:

- In the spring of 2003, I was going through a rough time spiritually. I was in South Carolina as a freshman in college, and my dad was back here in Chicago dying of cancer. I was filled with questions about what God was doing with my dad, who died a few months later. My future plans were murky at that point. One evening I went to a small choir concert on my college campus, and one of the songs had a line that said, “let the unknown tomorrow bring with it what it may.” It’s from a song by William Cowper, who had his own spiritual struggles.
- That reminder, that I could throw myself onto God’s providence and believe that whatever came my way in the coming months was part of God’s plan, gave me hope and joy that I had lost sight of for a time.

- That is the confidence that we as Christians can have when we're reminded that **God himself is the powerful creator. Your response is simply to trust in him.**
 - This is one of the most obvious responses for us to this truth: if God made everything, if he is the Creator God that the whole Bible describes and celebrates, the details of our lives are in his hands. If he can make everything with the word of his mouth, surely he can deal with the little problems in our lives.
- He can handle your situation. He doesn't get stressed or anxious.
- Trust in God, our powerful, sovereign, and wise Creator.

Title: The Goal of Creation

Text: Genesis 1-2

FCF: We lose sight of why God created us in the first place.

Big idea: In creating the world and filling it with image-bearers, God had a glorious goal in mind.

Date preached: February 21, 2021 (sermon **4 of 10**)

Overall goal: to explore the purpose for which God created all things.

Scripture intro:

- Please turn in your Bible once again to Genesis 1. This is the same chapter we studied together last week, but we'll be looking at a different aspect of it and including several other passages as well.
- This series is about growing in our understanding of the Bible as a whole. We could call this biblical literacy.
- Remember from a few weeks ago, I am defining biblical literacy as *the ability to read the Bible accurately and draw relevant connections between one part of the Bible and another*.
- In order to do that, I believe we need a good understanding of the overarching storyline of the Bible. We need to understand that the Bible is one book, written by one divine Author, telling one story.
- I'm preaching this series about how the Bible is organized and what story it is telling because I am convinced that the more we understand how the Bible's storyline progresses, the better we'll understand each individual passage we read.
 - You might read the story of the exodus from Egypt and marvel at what God accomplished there. But the more you understand the rest of the Bible, the more you look back at that passage with eyes open to how it sets the table for God's ultimate, greater salvation from an even greater enemy than Pharaoh. So in one sense the story stands on its own two feet, but in another sense, it is a story within a story, and it makes the most sense when you understand the whole story.
 - I suppose the Star Wars movies are probably the same way—though I have so little knowledge about them that I could be wrong. But my guess is that each of the nine movies tell their own story, but they are most richly understood when you've seen all nine in order. If I'm wrong on that, please let me know afterwards. I don't plan to watch them to find out.
- I think this sermon will provide us with a framework for putting together the whole Bible as telling one story, as I mentioned a moment ago.
- Let's read a very brief portion of Genesis 1, just verses 26-28.

Sermon intro:

- When our family made preparations for our drive up here during our move from Alabama last March, Clarissa and I wanted to get a quiet AirBnB where we could relax for a few days about halfway through the trip, somewhere near Louisville. We didn't need to relax just because we knew we would have been driving that whole day. We also knew we would be emotional from saying goodbyes in a hurry, and after weeks of frantically packing all of our earthly treasures into boxes.
- So a few days before we left Alabama, while somewhat in a hurry because of all there was to do that week, we chose a place just south of Louisville, a place that advertised itself as being "sparkling clean" and having lots of outdoor space for us to roam around in a quiet, country setting. It sounded perfect!
- We packed the truck, spent the night with some friends, and then hit the road the next

morning. When we arrived late that afternoon, though, the house was not even clean, much less “sparkling.” The whole place had a foul odor both inside and out, dead bugs were all over the kitchen counters and sink, and the furniture was all severely overused. That outdoor space for roaming around was populated by multiple dogs that did anything but calm any of us down. And, because it was in an idyllic quiet, country setting, there was no cell phone service or internet access for us to use to try to get ourselves out of this mess.

- Clarissa and I, already exhausted and utterly spent, were both irritable. I don’t remember all the details of the conversation we had as we decided whether to cut our losses and run for the closest Hampton Inn & Suites, but I do remember thinking, what is the point of all this, anyway? How could we get ourselves in such a ridiculous situation? The point of all this was to be able to relax after a long day of driving and a long month of stress. Instead, here we are feeling like we can’t even sit down because of all the filth in the place, but we also can’t be outside because of all the dogs roaming around. The essence of our conversation was, “why are we here in the first place?!”
- Hopefully your life isn’t that uncomfortable all the time. But no matter how comfortable or uncomfortable your life is at any given time, that’s actually an important question for you to ask yourself: why are we here in the first place? Why did God make us and put us here on earth?
- The Bible gives us a compelling answer to that question. There was nothing unintentional or random about what God did when he made the world and created humans. What we learn as we read God’s word is that **in creating the world and filling it with image-bearers, God had a glorious goal in mind.**
- Rather than state what that goal is here at the outset, I want us to try to compile a statement based on a few key texts of Scripture. Then we’ll check our work, so to speak, with some corroborating passages. In doing so, I think we’ll be able to identify an accurate way of summarizing God’s goal in creation.
- Last week we looked at what we learn about God by the way he made the world. This sermon focuses especially on the goal of creation—what God was aiming at by making the earth and putting people in a garden.
- How do we know why God made everything? We can understand what he was doing through at least two means. The first is through direct statements in the Bible. Some of those are in Genesis 1, but others are in less familiar parts of the Bible. The second way we can determine what God was aiming at is by comparing the beginning of the story with the end of the story. In other words, by seeing how Genesis 1-2 compare with Revelation 21-22. Those are the bookends of the Bible, and they are remarkably similar.
- Let’s start by analyzing the details of Genesis 1:26-28.

Exegesis of Genesis 1:26-28, 2:15

- What did God tell Adam and Eve to do when he created them? In 1:28, he tells them to “be fruitful and multiply.” This means, simply put, have kids. Rather than having just a few people who serve God in the earth, the world should be teeming with little representatives of God in the earth. In doing so, those people would “fill the earth” with other image-bearers. And those image-bearers would “subdue” the earth and “have dominion” over all that God had made.
- There are countless implications for us to consider in this regard.
 - For one, we need to regularly remind ourselves that life is not about us achieving personal happiness. The self-help section in bookstores would lead you to believe

that your life is about you, your success, your peace of mind. Rather, life is about God—he is the authority and we are all accountable to him, whether we like it or not, whether we realize it or not, whether we believe it or not. We are here to do God’s bidding.

- Secondly, as we discussed last week, we see in this passage that God starts and finishes the story. The story started when he wanted it to, it ends when he says it ends, and he doesn’t lose control or have to change course in between.
- Or we can put it another way: God is the king; the world is his kingdom; we are the king’s people doing the king’s business under the king’s rule for the king’s praise.
- In the next chapter, we observe an important facet of that subduing and exercising dominion over God’s creation. According to Genesis 2:15, what was Adam’s role in the garden, even before God made Eve? It was to “work” the garden, and to “keep it.”
- In recent decades, Bible scholars have observed that the language Moses uses to describe Adam’s task in the garden is similar to the task of priests in the tabernacle and temple. It appears, many scholars argue, that it is as if the garden of Eden was a “temple,” a sacred space in which man dwells with God. So Adam’s job, then, was to be a priest in the garden. He worships there, and he guards the sacred place in which God is present.
- What we begin to see, then, is that God intended for the whole world to be a “temple” in which we as God’s priests serve him and worship him in his presence. This significantly moves us toward understanding what our task is as Christians. John Piper is onto something when he says “missions exists because worship doesn’t.”
 - This is why we send missionaries to hard-to-reach places. And it’s why Brainard Avenue Baptist Church exists, in our own hard-to-reach place. This is why we lovingly tell sinners that Jesus is the only way of salvation. If we believe what the Bible teaches about who God is and who we are, then telling sinners to turn in faith to Jesus is the most loving gift we can ever give them.

The theme of Creation isn’t limited to Genesis 1-2

- As we read through the Bible from the beginning, we start to see similarities between the major characters in the narrative. For instance, we see a lot of similarities just between Adam, Noah, and Abraham in the first twelve chapters of the Bible. Now the question is, what is the point of similarity?
 - It’s that the Bible treats all of them as people who are at the beginning of a new creation. Adam is the beginning of humanity after God created a world that was formless and empty, and then made it beautiful. Noah is the beginning of the renewed world after the chaos of the flood. Abraham is the beginning of a new family that will bless the earth after the chaos of Babel. And then, ultimately, these similarities point to Jesus, the beginning of the New Creation, bringing order from the chaos of our sinful hearts and a fallen world.
- Theologians have noted multiple parallels between the creation account in Gen 1-2 and the story of Noah in Gen 8. Let me give you just three:
 - Be fruitful and multiply (1:28/9:1)
 - Chaos, then order
 - Dry land emerging from the waters, then vegetation
- Then with Abraham, God is making another new start—another “new creation.”
 - Adam was the first man; Abraham was the first man of a new family

- In Exodus 1:7, the “be fruitful and multiply” theme shows up again, showing he had fulfilled that mandate.
- Again, ultimately these similarities point us to Jesus himself.
 - He the “true and better Adam,” who is the first man of God’s new creation
 - He is the “true and better Noah,” who rescued God’s people from the flood waters of God’s judgment
 - He is the “true and better Abraham,” through whom all the families of the earth are blessed
- It’s important to note that Adam, Noah, and Abraham are similar in that they all have a fall narrative tied to them—they sinned in shameful, obvious ways that really leave us scratching our heads. But where they are connected in that way, Jesus is completely different from that. They all fall; Jesus never falls. He was in every way tempted as we are, yet without sin.
 - Gospel call: This is why we as sinners can and must turn to Jesus for forgiveness. He is the only person who has ever lived who has not fallen short of the glory of God. When we turn from our sin and believe in him as the only Savior, he takes our sin to his own account, and gives us his perfect righteousness. This is the only way to right with God—to be “justified,” the Bible calls it, by faith alone in Christ alone. We here at Brainard urge you to turn to him. Please talk to one of our members after the service if we can answer any questions you have about this.
- Besides the similarities between these major individuals in the story, we also see major similarities between the beginning and the ending of the Bible.
- We don’t have the time to flip back and forth between Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22, but I encourage you to do that at home, perhaps even this afternoon. When you compare the beginning and ending of the Bible, you will be struck with how they are intentionally similar.
- What exactly do they have in common with each other? The river flowing in the midst of the garden/city; the tree of life; security from anything that could harm the citizens of that place; no sin; the citizens communicate directly with God; there is joy, peace, righteousness, and beauty. Even beyond that, if you back up to Revelation 19, you have the Marriage Feast of the Lamb, which matches up with the first marriage in Genesis 2:24. There are probably several other similarities I’m not even drawing out.

The Goal of Creation

So what is the goal of creation? Why did God make everything? Here is my attempt at combining several of the explicit statements we saw in Genesis 1-2, with some other passages we’ll touch on in a few minutes:

God desired to establish a beautiful temple-city on a holy mountain where he dwells with his holy people in peace and security and where his glory fills the land.

Let’s take that statement apart and look at it in detail.

- **Beautiful:** it is filled with trees, river of life; descriptions of the promised land tie in here, and we know that that land is flowing with milk & honey (cows and bees need grassy fields, a variety of flowers).
- **Temple:** a holy place where God dwells; priests commune with him (Gen. 2:15)
- **City:** Rev 21-22 mentions “city” 14 times by my count; Hebrews 11-13 mentions “city” 5 times, all describing the city where God himself is the maker.
- This beautiful arboretum city is on a **holy mountain:** Isa. 11:9, 25:6, 27:13, 65:25; Rev. 21:10. We also know that Eden itself was both a garden and a mountain (Ezekiel 28:13 says “you were in Eden, the garden of God,” and the next verse says “you were on the holy mountain of God.” It’s likely that Eden was the “city,” and the garden was a marked off part of that city. But either way, it appears that Eden was on a mountain. This is another connection between Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22. The New Jerusalem is on a holy mountain, as was the original place in which God’s people lived with God.
- **God dwells:** Adam & Eve dwelt with God in unhindered joy in the garden, until the fall; Rev. 21:3 says “the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them.” But they won’t be dwelling together in an isolated temple; there is no temple, because “its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev. 21:22). Because the inhabitants of that city are in open communion with God himself, the whole city, the whole land, the entire new heaven and new earth, is the temple where God is worshiped.
- **Holy people:** Who dwells in that city? It is no one who is under the curse of sin. Once Adam & Eve sinned, they were exiled from the garden (Gen 3:23-24). They were no longer in God’s immediate presence. At the end of the story, those who rebel against God and are not holy are separated from God forever (Rev. 21:8). Those who do not pursue holiness (Heb. 12) will not see the Lord, because they prove themselves to not be citizens of that city.
- **Peace and security:** In Gen. 1-2, there was nothing dangerous in the garden. It was supposed to stay that way, but Adam failed to protect the garden by keeping the serpent out. In Rev. 21-22, we will dwell in peace and security because no one “who does what is detestable or false” (21:27) will be there. Even animals that are threatening to us now will not be threatening then: wolves will lay down with the lamb (Isa. 11:6). If you’ve ever seen a wolf and a lamb in the same pen, you know that doesn’t happen in our fallen world—they don’t lay down together. Once the curse is removed, that will be happening again, as it was in Eden.
- **Glory fills the land:** God wants his glory to fill the earth. This has always been his goal for creation. Isa. 11:9: “for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”
 - What part will we have, and what part do we have now, in causing God’s glory to fill the earth? As his holy image-bearers spread across the earth and do his will, God’s glory expands.

Objections

- But what if I don’t like cities? Why would I want to live in one forever? There are certainly millions of people for whom that is the case.
- About five years ago I got a haircut in our town in Alabama, and the lady cutting my hair told me she never drives to Birmingham or Atlanta because there was no purpose, she hated cities, and she was terrified of traffic. She lives on a single-lane dirt road where she has no neighbors, and she couldn’t imagine living anywhere else or having any reason for wanting to be close to people. She hated even having to drive to the barber shop where

she worked because of all the traffic (which is basically normal, lunchtime traffic around here).

- I suppose my response to that objection would be, the reasons you don't like cities now will no longer be problems in the New Jerusalem. There will be no strife, pollution, danger, anxiety. And we assume, no traffic jams, but if there are, we will be completely holy so no one will be laying on their horn out of anger!
- Someone could also object, I see the garden elements from Genesis 1-2 in Revelation 21-22, but I don't see a city from Rev. 21-22 mentioned in Genesis 1-2.
 - That's a valid statement, but we do see that God told Adam & Eve to "be fruitful and multiply," which would eventually result in there being lots of people living close together, serving each other as people do in cities today.

The City of God

- We all recognize, of course, that we are not currently in God's city. In fact, far from it, we are in what Augustine called "the city of man." We as Christians are living in Babylon, where we are exiles, but where we are commanded to live as citizens of God's city.
 - Paul describes this in Philippians 3: our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, Jesus, who will come again.
 - The author of Hebrews touches on this in Hebrews 11: Abraham and Sarah were strangers and exiles on the earth, who were "seeking a homeland." The passage goes on to say "they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city."
- John Newton, who wrote Amazing Grace and hundreds of other hymns, talks about this theme of the city of God in "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken." It's not a song about Jerusalem, the city in the Middle East; it's a song about the New Jerusalem, the holy city where we will dwell with God forever.

Applications:

- Make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20)
 - Of your own family. Teach your children the gospel!
 - Of your church family. Walk side by side with each other through the process of spiritual growth!
 - Of everyone you meet. Tell sinners that "there is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains!"
- Live as a citizen of heaven (holy, content, with a right perspective of what you experience)
 - Don't get caught up in what is happening in this place. You don't truly "live" here; you are passing through. You are a pilgrim, a sojourner, an exile.
 - Don't be concerned with how the world views you. As John Newton says in that song I just mentioned, the world can mock and scorn you for giving

your entire life to following Jesus, but only citizens of heaven have lasting joy.

- When we give ourselves to pursuing joy in what this life offers, we will always be dissatisfied. Are Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg satisfied by all they own? The book of Ecclesiastes, which we will study this spring and summer, gives a resounding answer to that question. We are never satisfied in this life until we find our ultimate joy in Christ himself.
- Acknowledge that your life is not your own.
 - Creation also addresses the reality that we are prone to believe we are accountable to no one but ourselves. It especially makes sense that someone would believe this way if they are convinced of evolutionary theory about the origins of people, but for even those of us who say we believe in creation, our hearts rebel against the Creator and we want to believe that we give an answer to no one else. Repent of this pattern of thinking!

Conclusion:

- As Clarissa sat at the table in that poor little country house in Kentucky that evening, we were evaluating our priorities. We wanted a place we could sleep well. We wanted a place where we could cook our own food, since we had tons of food from our fridge and freezer in coolers with us. We wanted a place the kids could move around after being in the car all day. We wanted to not get COVID—at that point we knew almost nothing about how it spread. All of these goals were important, but ultimately, we decided it would be best to drive on to Louisville, and once we get to a place with cell reception, one of us would start calling for a hotel that checked all those boxes. Thankfully we were able to do that. We got a hotel where almost no one else was staying that had everything we needed. We had achieved our goals for that night!
- The Bible ends with a glorious picture of God’s goal for creation perfectly achieved. In other words, the Bible indeed has a happy ending! When you come to the end of the story, the curse has been undone. God’s people are safe in God’s presence, and are free from sin, suffering, and death itself!
- How should we respond to this vision of what the world was made to be, and of what we were made to do? Revelation 19:7: “Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory.”

Title: The Fallen Kingdom

Text: Genesis 3

FCF: The world is severely broken.

Big idea: Everything that is wrong in the world is the result of human sin.

Date preached: February 28, 2021 (sermon **5 of 10**)

Overall goal: to prove that the Fall is a fundamental element for understanding the Bible and our world.

Scripture intro:

- Please turn in your Bible to Genesis 3.
- As we've seen over the last few weeks, God created paradise, put man in it, gave him his job description, and gave him everything he needed to be fruitful, multiply, and have dominion. But something happened that changed everything.
- You only need to have a pulse to observe that something is terribly wrong with the world. We see it in the way our relationships are so easily damaged by something we say or do, by the violence we see and hear and read about, by peoples' lives being ruined by the impulses of another person.
- The way most non-Christians explain what is wrong with people and the world is neither compelling nor comprehensive. To blame the problem on poverty or lack of education is to see symptoms of the problem but not the problem itself. The Bible's explanation, however, is both compelling and comprehensive. That explanation is summarized in what we refer to as "the fall."
- The fall affects every part of life. Knowing this fact is not just important for reading the Bible; it's important for how we understand our lives and the tendencies of our own hearts.
- The whole Bible is written with the fall in mind.
 - The narrative sections of the Bible reveal the fall by the way they describe the horrible ways that sinners sin against others.
 - The wisdom books (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon) reveal the fall by describing the futility of life (Eccl.), the foolishness in our hearts (Proverbs), the way that even our most sacred relationships in life are damaged by sin (SoS), and the rebellion of people against God (Psalms).
 - The New Testament letters describe and explain the fall and show how our sin and suffering are all tied up in what happened in the Garden of Eden.
- The passage we're about to read explains the Bible's perspective on why the world is so overrun with problems and sadness. Every passage of the Bible, from here until the end of Revelation, is influenced by this unit.
- Let's read **Genesis 3:1-7**.

Sermon intro:

- In the spring of 2015, our family had been renting a house in Alabama for about a year and Clarissa and I decided it was time to buy our first home. We started looking at options online. We actually only walked through two, and ironically they were right next door to each other. We chose the better of the two, and in July of that year we finally moved into our first house. It was a foreclosure, but we felt it was in good enough condition that we could make some minor tweaks over time to make it a wonderful house for our family. That's exactly what happened.
- But that first day we moved in, on a Saturday in July 2015, we started settling in and finally that evening we started to get ready for bed. In order to do that, I went upstairs and started a bath for our boys. As I turned the handle in the bathtub to turn on the water, the

good news was the water started coming out. The bad news is that water was shooting out of the shower handle, not just the faucet. I was standing in the tub doing all I could to turn the water off so I could try to fix the problem somehow, and I was getting soaked from the water shooting straight at me from the handle. I couldn't get it to turn off. So I went downstairs, dripping wet, to go outside to turn the water off, and as I went to tell Clarissa what was going on, I noticed that water was flowing through the ceiling from underneath the bathtub faucet. My first thought was, "so this is home ownership."

- That story reminds me of Genesis 1-3. The beautiful house that we had just bought was like our own little Garden of Eden. We were going to exercise dominion over it. But right away, something terrible happened. Our pristine, glorious new beginning was ruined. That's exactly what we read about when we start reading the Bible from the first page. God makes everything just right, and in what seems like no time at all, mankind ruins what God had made. We learn from Genesis 3 that **the fall is a fundamental element for understanding the Bible and the world we live in.**
- If we don't adequately factor in what has happened in the fall, we won't be able to make sense of the rest of the Bible's storyline. And we will also be confused and shocked beyond all reason by what we experience in our lives. I actually think that in order for us to enjoy life, we are best served by understanding the fall. And the passage that most thoroughly describes the origins of the fall and its results is this passage we've just read.
- The passage tells us that **everything that is wrong in the world**—even including the fact that water falls through kitchen ceilings—**is the result of human sin.**
- This passage describes where human sin started, and teaches us three truths about that sin: sin defies God's perfect word, sin defiles God's perfect creation, and sin destroys God's perfect plan.

I. Sin defies God's perfect word (1-6)

A. You are tempted to disbelieve the accuracy of God's word (1-3)

1. You are tempted to see God as unreasonable (1)

- Surely God wouldn't want you to be unhappy, right? Temptation often starts here for us. If God wants us to be happy, I shouldn't have to say no to what are normal thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This is a common way of thinking.
- 1--serpent. This is a bit jarring since it is not mentioned until this point in the story.
- 1--beast of the field—reminds us that it is created by God (cf. 2:19)
- 1--Satan approaches Eve, who did not actually hear God's single prohibition for living in the garden. She may be more vulnerable than Adam for that reason.

2. You are tempted to see God as more stringent than he is (2-3)

- 2-3--what she said was mostly accurate, but Eve added to God's words. The "neither shall you touch it" seems to be more than God told Adam in 2:17.

B. You are tempted to disbelieve the reliability of God's word (4-6)

1. You are tempted to think God is against us (4-5)

- 4--the serpent lies
 - Never technically called Satan in this passage (but cf. Rev. 12:9)
- 4--the root of sin is unbelief--not taking what God has said as truth

- We continue to believe lies, every time we sin. It is not just that we don't believe what God says. That is certainly the case. But we also believe other lies. When we yell at someone because they have wronged us, we are believing that it is our right to get vengeance. But "vengeance is mine, says the Lord."
- 5—"you will be like God." But they already were like God, being made in his image.
- 5--he mentions what you'll gain from sin, but not what you will lose. We forget that when we sin, you lose more than you ever gain, and you lose more than you ever thought possible.

2. You are tempted to think God would never hold you accountable

(6)

- 6--why did Adam eat? Paul lays the blame at his feet, not Eve's. He knew better and still ate. He may have been standing right next to Eve when the serpent was tempting her.

II. Sin defiles God's perfect creation (7-19)

A. Perfect fellowship with God was lost (7-13)

1. His presence is now fearful (7-8)

- 7--cf. v. 5, "eyes will be opened"/"eyes were opened." Yes, their eyes were opened, but it wasn't a good effect like Satan had made them expect.
- 7—shame is a natural consequence of our sin. Everyone knows the feeling. And it's a feeling God created, so that we would not continue in sin but would turn to him for forgiveness and cleansing.
 - **Illustration:** A few years ago I asked a teenager in our church, who is the person in this group that you have the hardest time loving? She immediately blushed, she quietly said, "my sister," and she quickly looked down and her eyes teared up. Why did she do that? Because she felt shame over the sin of being jealous of her sister, and she had just honestly revealed that for the first time.
 - **Gospel call:** Perhaps you are here this morning feeling shame over your sin. Maybe you recently lied to someone and you know you need to go back to them and tell them the truth. Maybe you have a life-dominating sin that you are hiding and you fear that someone will find out. Perhaps you're engaging in self-harm, or have an eating disorder, or are addicted to pornography or a substance. Many times, when we live this way, we want no one to find out. Deep down, though, we wish someone else knew so we didn't have to live in the dark anymore. If you are a Christian, we urge you to talk to someone, perhaps one of our elders or another mature believer here, and get the help you need. We are not professionals here, but you don't need a professional. You need a Christian with a Bible who will walk side by side with you.

- If you are not a Christian, we are so glad you are here! We hope you feel welcomed and loved. And we also hope the truth of this sermon will stir thoughts within you of your relationship with God. He loves you. We want you to know that. And he desires to rescue you from your sin and its punishment. If you are feeling shame over your sin, and know you need help, please talk to one of our members. If you'd like to talk with me, I'd be happy to sit down with you after the service and hear your story and point you to the love of God in the gospel. He is the only Savior, and he delights to give new life to sinners like you and me.
- 8—This verse raises a question: if God is a spirit, how was he walking? The Bible often uses human characteristics to describe God, so that he will be more understandable to our minds which cannot comprehend everything about him.
 - Likely this is describing a part of every-day activity in the garden—they walked with God in perfect fellowship.
- 8--hiding from God when we sin is a result of the fall—all of a sudden, the perfect fellowship they enjoyed was gone.
- 8--our efforts to remedy sin on our own is useless and hopeless
- **Illustration:** Last summer in the midst of the racial conflict and protests around the country, the NBA was in its “bubble” in Orlando and decided to cancel some of their games as a way of showing solidarity with what was happening in so many cities. I was listening to ESPN Radio one afternoon during all this while running an errand. One of the reporters put a bit of a damper on the enthusiasm of those who felt that the NBA players were going to somehow bring about society-wide change through their public statements and acts of protest before their games. The man said, “listen, unless Jesus Christ himself walks out of that locker room, nothing is really going to change.”
- I thought that was a remarkable statement to make on national radio, whether he is a confessing Christian or not. He understood that the problems of humanity are not just in lack of knowledge about right or wrong. He may not be able to elaborate on why that was the case, but he was acknowledging that our problems are deep. They are the result of the fall, and until redemption has taken full effect, there is nothing that will truly change.
 - That's not to say we can't see some important gradual changes in society, such as were accomplished through the likes of Rosa Parks. But it is to say that even after bus laws were changed in the middle of the last century, people are still hateful and bitter and arrogant, and no law or protest or amendment will change that fact. What happened with George Floyd in Minneapolis and with Kyle Rittenhouse in Kenosha and with protestors in DC on January 6 was simply human hearts showing their true colors. Those are examples of human hearts that need new life, not new laws. Christian, put your hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to change lives, not in a piece of legislation or in the hands of the Supreme Court.

2. His presence is now condemning (9-13)

- 9—the passage depicts him as a kind father seeking his child. The question is designed to make Adam consider his sin.
- 9--God is the one who takes initiative in pursuing man, never the other way around. This is the gospel! You didn't seek God, but in his mercy he pursued you.

- 9--why did God just call to the man? Why not both man and woman? I believe this is because Adam was liable and responsible. He didn't do his job in protecting the garden, or the wife God graciously gave him.
- 10--the first fear. We have fearful hearts because of sin's effects on our hearts. We feel terror and shaking from being exposed, just as Adam did here. It won't be till we are in the New Jerusalem that we can live in a place without fear.
- 11--why did God "pretend he didn't know"?
 - Questions stir the conscience, accusations harden the heart. He was graciously helping Adam confess his sin.
- 12--the man blame-shifts—not just to "the woman," but to God himself! The implication certainly is that God is responsible for Adam's demise. As if Adam is saying, if you hadn't given me this woman, I wouldn't have been in this situation!
 - A truly repentant person is honest with the facts, accepts responsibility for his actions, and doesn't try to negotiate consequences. I would ask you, is that your habit for dealing with your sin? Or do you go on the defensive when someone points out a weakness or sinful action or reaction? May the Lord make us in this church humble, repentant people!
- 13--the woman blame-shifts as well. This shows that this kind of reaction is a natural result of the fall. It is hard to accept responsibility for our sin. Perhaps this is because we intrinsically know that we cannot deal with sin on our own. We need someone else to pay for it.

B. Perfect harmony in creation was lost (14-19)

1. God intends to provide a Redeemer (14-15)

- 14--God begins to mete out the punishment—first to the serpent, then the woman, then the ground, then the man.
- 15—this is the first hint of the gospel message. The hint is then gradually clarified and expanded on as you come to key figures like Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, and so on.
 - enmity--a life and death struggle between two enemies
 - how does the woman have seed? a general reference to her offspring
 - bruise head, bruise heel: a serpent may bite at the heel because it is on ground, but the foot it bites will then smash the head and kill the serpent. You can recover from a heel wound, but a head wound in this case brings death.
- Seed of the woman/seed of the serpent theme begins in this passage and continues till the end of the Bible. We see the seed of the serpent warring against God's people in characters such as Pharaoh, Goliath, Saul, Absalom, Nebuchadnezzar, Herod, Judas, and false teachers.
- In the Bible's ongoing story, the fall and its effects are obviously not limited to the OT. As I said earlier, this aspect of the Bible's story affects every passage. People sin and suffer and live in the mess of a fallen world all the way till the last few chapters of Revelation.

2. God intends to remind man of sin's consequences (16-19)

- I'm going to move quickly through this portion for the sake of time, but in essence, what we see is that our lives are constantly reminding us that we live in a fallen world.
- 16—Even though the Redeemer came through a woman giving birth to a baby, even the act of giving birth reminds us of the curse of sin. I've watched my wife give birth three times. I was a little preoccupied each time, but as I reflect on what my wife went through on those days, it reminds us of the hardship of living in a cursed world.
- 17-18—the ground is also cursed. Romans 8 expands on this and describes the whole creation groaning together, waiting for redemption.
- 19—we will return to the ground (2:7—we were made from the dust). Your life will be filled with sorrow and pain and danger, and then you will die. Ecclesiastes is a long meditation on life in this fallen world and what it means to prepare to “return to the ground.”

III. Sin destroys God's perfect plan (20-24)

A. Sin requires death (20-21)

- Death is the absence of God. Life is being in the presence of God.
- 20—this verse tells us what Eve means—mother of all living. That means Adam understood that they would not die immediately. Life would come from them, so that the Redeemer would come to give true life.
- 21--God gives a covering—this verse describes the first atonement. There is tremendous theological importance here. For one thing, Adam's homemade solution was inadequate. This is always the case. In some cultures, the solution to the problem of sin is to pay your idol. No matter where you live or what you try, no solution is adequate except for the one God himself provides. Secondly, the covering was substitutionary—something had to die to cover man's sin. This drives us right to the heart of the gospel. It took a perfect sacrifice to cover our sin.

B. Sin requires separation from God (22-24)

- 22—God did not want sinful man to live forever in his sinful state, so he exiled man from the garden. There is similarity in Adam and Eve's exile from the Garden, and Israel's exile from the Land. Even more, we are in exile, awaiting the city where we will dwell with God forever.
- 24--Cherubim block the way—later on, this image would be sewn onto the curtains in the tabernacle and the temple as a way of reminding God's people that because of your sin, you cannot be with God. He is holy, and we are not.

Concluding reflections on the fall

- We see reminders of the fall everywhere we turn. In December one of my dad's sisters in

California sent me my Grandpa's war medals from WWII. I feel great pride to have those and to think of his bravery. One of those medals is a Purple Heart, because he was hit by a Japanese grenade somewhere in the Pacific.

- But those war medals are sobering reminders of the fallen world. War happens because of the fall. It's not supposed to be this way! In the Garden, there was no such thing as weapons designed to wound or even kill someone else made in the image of God. And when we return to paradise in the New City, there will no longer be these reminders of sin.
- The fall helps us make sense of blind spots and frankly, downright evil that we see, even in Christian leaders. It explains how Jonathan Edwards could own slaves. It explains why churches split. It explains how influential Christian leaders like Josh Harris can fall away from the faith and how Ravi Zacharias can abuse women the same day that he stands before thousands to defend the faith.
- But in fact, these events shouldn't really surprise us, because we know our own impulses. These realities just remind us that people are basically evil. That may not sit well with you. But our hearts are inclined to do what is best for us in the moment, not what is best for other people.

Conclusion:

- Last week, a young mom a few miles from here was arrested for leaving her 7-year-old and 3-year-old boys at home while she went to work for the morning. Her children's teachers on Zoom realized that no parents were home. She was released on bail that night, but the children were taken into protective services. Those poor children had to endure being separated from all they know and love, because a mother had to decide between being present for the wellbeing of her kids, and going to work to provide food and shelter for those same children.
- This kind of heart-rending story only happens in a fallen world. This story is only possible because of a pandemic in which kids are not in schools, but most people can't afford to have someone supervise their kids' e-learning while they go to work. This is such a broken situation! And every detail of what I just said is evidence of the fall. Evidence that the world is not as it should be.
- The solution to this fallen world is not simple. That's because the problem isn't that people make bad decisions or don't have enough education or don't have enough money. The problem is that people are bad.
- There are no exceptions to this. You are not an exception to this! Think of the worst thing you've ever done, the one thing you would die if someone knew about. Are you really willing to stand up and tell this room that worst thing you've ever done? I know I'm not. None of us are, because we know our hearts too well. We know evil resides in our hearts.
- But one of the reasons the Bible has a happy ending is that when we read Revelation 21-22, the curse has been reversed. The fall is a thing of the past. How we get there will be what we study together next week, the doctrine of redemption.
- Praise God that the story doesn't end today, in a fallen world, but that it does end in a place where, as C.S. Lewis describes, "the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

Title: Redemption, Accomplished and Applied

Text: Romans 3:21-26

FCF: Deep down, we all know we need to be forgiven.

Big idea: The righteous God righteously declares righteous the unrighteous.

Date preached: March 7, 2021 (sermon **6 of 10**)

Overall goal: to celebrate God's determined plan to redeem his fallen people.

Scripture intro:

- Please turn in your Bible to Romans 3.
- Everyone intuitively asks four questions: Where did we come from? What's wrong with the world? What's the solution to that problem? What will be the final result when the solution takes full effect?
- Another way of saying it is that everyone has a story, whether they realize it or not, that explains where the world came from, what's wrong with the world, what would make the world right again, and what the world would look like when that solution has taken full effect. This is a way of saying everyone understands the categories of "Creation, Fall, Redemption, New Creation."
- Last week we saw that the perfection of God's creation, described in Genesis 1-2, was ruined by the fall in Genesis 3. We saw the essence of the fall, which is man's rebellion against God, and the results of the fall, which we could summarize as sorrow and separation from God.
- In today's passage, we see God's answer to the fall. It's perhaps the passage that most clearly and concisely describes how God makes right what went wrong in the fall.
- Let's **read Romans 3:21-26** to see how the apostle Paul describes that solution.

Sermon intro:

- A few years ago I was with a friend in Washington, DC at a conference. When we arrived at the airport at the beginning of the trip, my friend and I got a taxi to take us to our AirBnB. We immediately struck up a conversation with the taxi driver, and quickly moved toward sharing the gospel with him. We asked him questions like what he believes about Jesus Christ and whether he believes he is a sinner. Eventually, toward the end of the car ride, he said, "I know I have done bad things. I know there is a God. But I don't know who he is, or what to do so that he will forgive me."
- What that man was expressing was the truth that deep down, we all know we need to be forgiven.
- That is the world in which the Bible operates. It is the air we breathe when we read the Bible—the air that tells us, there is a major problem, and I don't know what to do about it. But thankfully, the Bible doesn't leave us there. The Bible gives a comprehensive solution to the problem of our sin.
- Here's one way to summarize how the Bible describes the solution to that problem: **The righteous God righteously declares righteous the unrighteous.**

Sermon body:

- To this point in the book of Romans, in chapters 1-3, Paul has laid out a convincing argument that *every person is guilty before God*. That's true for Jew and Gentile alike. He has argued that fact so that now he can give the answer to that problem. The answer to the problem of our guilt before God is summarized in a person, Jesus Christ.
- Beginning with at least Martin Luther 500 years ago, theologians have said that the whole book of Romans turns on this paragraph. It is the most important paragraph in this book, because it so clearly and concisely lays out the answer to our biggest problem.

- A lot of times, people think their biggest problem is their suffering. Or their biggest problem is their circumstances. The Bible will hear none of that. Your biggest problem is that you are guilty before a holy God, and you can do nothing to solve that problem on your own. That's why we need the message of this passage.
- So what does this passage say? Let's look at it in detail. In essence, this passage is making four statements about the righteousness of God. What are those statements?
 - **1. The Old Testament attests to the righteousness of God**
 - **2. All humans have equal access to God's righteousness through faith**
 - **3. The atoning sacrifice of Jesus is the source of God's righteousness**
 - **4. God himself is just in declaring people righteous**
- Let's work through those four statements, beginning in verse 21.

Verses 21-22: The Old Testament attests to the righteousness of God

- *But now*: this contrast is to say that an important change in salvation history has occurred. As opposed to in the Old Covenant era, now, at this point, Christ has come, has lived, died, and come back to life.
- *The righteousness of God has been manifested*: to manifest something means to make something clear or visible. You might have a co-worker who does a really bad job because he's lazy. You could say "he is manifesting a poor work ethic." It's becoming *clear* that he doesn't know how to work hard! So this verse is saying that God has *revealed* his righteousness in a new way.
 - The other question we need to answer here is, what does it mean by "the righteousness of God"? Is that referring to the fact that God himself is righteous, or is it referring to the way God declares sinners righteous? It's that second option. The way God declares sinners righteous is revealed in a person, Jesus.
- *Apart from the law*: In the Old Testament, the law itself revealed God's holiness and saving work. Paul is saying that God is now doing that in a very different way.
- *The Law and the Prophets bear witness to it*: we saw in Luke 24 a while back that "Moses and all the Prophets" referred to the whole Old Testament. That's the case here as well. "The Law" refers to the first five books of the Bible, written by Moses. The Prophets is shorthand for the rest of the Bible. Paul says, the whole Old Testament prophesied that this day would come, when a Messiah would save God's people. The "Messiah" simply means the anointed one, or the promised one, the one God set aside to accomplish his saving work.
- *The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ*: "righteousness" is by means of God's saving grace. It's not for those who keep the law, but for those who believe. God saves sinners, those who are guilty before him. And he does it for all those who put their faith in Jesus Christ alone. This is the consistent message of the Bible, that sinners are only saved by the grace of God when they put their trust in Jesus Christ. There is only one human condition for salvation, and that is faith in Jesus Christ.
- *For all who believe*: Paul wants it to be crystal clear that anyone can be saved. That's if they were Jewish, which means they were part of God's chosen nation going all the way back to Genesis 12 and his covenant with Abraham. But it's just as true if you are not Jewish, which means you are a Gentile. Paul is saying that the playing field is level—no one has an advantage over the other. Gentiles don't have to do more to be as "savable" as a Jewish person does.
- *For there is no distinction*: between Jews and Gentiles.

Verse 23-24: All humans have equal access to God's righteousness through faith

- *For all have sinned*: this phrase is explaining the “no distinction” idea from the end of verse 22. Why does God not distinguish between Jews and Gentiles? Because the problem is the same. Both Jews and Gentiles have sinned. And even more, both have the same sinful heart, because all of us come from Adam and Eve. The problem is not just that we have done bad deeds, and thought bad thoughts, and said bad words. We have all done all of that. But the real problem is that our hearts are corrupt because of our ancestors, Adam and Eve. Psalm 51 says we are sinful from conception. That makes it sound like we have no hope. But Paul is arguing that we actually *all* have hope, because the problem is the same. There is no ethnic distinction. No matter what your family tree looks like, it all goes back to the same root in the Garden of Eden.
- *All fall short of the glory of God*: because we have all done evil, we have all come short of the purpose for which God made us, which was to perfectly reveal and reflect his glory.
 - When a team loses a playoff game and a journalist interviews the losing coach or a player on the losing team, what does that person often say? “We just came up short of our goal. We didn’t get the job done. We’ll have to try hard to improve and come back better next year.” Using some of the language from this verse, we could paraphrase that to say, “we fell short of the glory of winning.” (If you haven’t heard anyone say anything like that before, you can find interviews of the Detroit Lions on YouTube.)
 - But notice the way I said that: “we fell short.” Is that what this verse says? No, it says we “fall short.” In other words, we *keep* falling short. We *always* fall short. Every day of our lives, whether we are Christians or not, we fall short of the glory of God. That’s kind of discouraging, isn’t it, that we can’t ever live the way we were created to live? But one day that won’t be the case: when we are in glorified bodies in the new heaven and new earth!
- *Sinners are justified by his grace as a gift*: there are many details we could discuss here. What does it mean to be justified? Who can justify someone else? To justify someone means to declare that person righteous. This is picturing a courtroom and the judge pronouncing something to be true. Either you are declared guilty, or you are declared righteous.
- And it’s not just that God is thinking of you as righteous, even though you are something else (unrighteous). It’s that you *are* righteous because God himself has said so. Because of that, he would himself be unrighteous to treat you as anything else.
 - If this is the first time you have heard of this doctrine in this level of detail, it may not sound to you as being that important. But what is the opposite of being justified? It’s being condemned.
 - But this is the best news you could ever hear. God justifies the ungodly!
 - This is better news than that you are going to have a child or a grandchild. This is better news than that you got into the academic program you applied for. This is better news than that your cancer is in remission, or that you got promoted, or that your preferred candidate won an election or your favorite team won a championship. Those can all be exciting and give you a huge burst of dopamine. But in reality, those pieces of “good news” pale in comparison to the news that “God has declared you righteous.”
- Has he done it begrudgingly? Is he stingy in doing this? No, he does it “freely,” or “as a gift.”
 - One of my professors from seminary, he and his wife send birthday gifts to me, my wife, and all of my children, and have done so for something like twelve

years. And I haven't had a class with him in over a decade! That is giving freely. That is giving abundantly. They're basically saying, "Just so you know, we're doing this because we like to give you nice things, not because we have to." And that's how God is in giving us salvation through Christ.

- How is this justification accomplished? First of all, "by his grace." Grace is God giving you favor that you did not deserve, when you actually deserve the exact opposite.
 - Think of how this would work out in an academic context. You are enrolled in a college class, but you hardly ever do the work required. You often don't even show up for class. The assignments you do turn in are late, and messy, and incoherent. You fail the tests. What would grace be in this context? Any passing grade, frankly. Why should your teacher let you pass the class? You don't deserve that!
 - Spiritually, we have failed every test. We have done the opposite of what we were asked to do for the "class," and yet, God graciously gives us the opposite of what we deserve. Instead of death, we get life. Instead of being accursed and left alone, we are embraced and welcomed into the family of God. That is astonishing! That calls for us to put our hands over our mouths in shock.
- So God justifies us by means of his grace, and secondly, by means of redemption.
- *Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:* By what means does God justify us? This phrase answers that question: through redemption.
 - As you can see, Paul is stacking together several loaded theological terms, all of which are important and beautiful.
 - Redemption is an inclusive term for describing the complete reversal of all the effects of the Fall.
 - In this context, redemption means to release someone (who deserves judgment) by the payment of a ransom.
 - Perhaps you could picture someone in a prison camp. Winston Churchill was a prisoner-of-war in South Africa during the Boer War in 1899. He eventually made a daring escape, survived several near-misses by the Boers, and was later brought home and hailed as a hero. But the alternative to escaping from prison in a situation like that is typically to die there, or to "be redeemed"—to have someone pay for your escape through a ransom.
- The NT frequently refers to Christ as our redeemer, and it is often looking back to the Exodus event, in which God released his people from Egypt and the bondage of life under Pharaoh. That entire OT event is a picture, or we could say a "type," of the greater deliverance and release that God provides us through Christ. When the OT celebrates God's redemption, it's typically in reference to the Exodus. In other cases it celebrates the end of exile, when God brings his people back into the land. Today when we celebrate redemption, it's in reference to the work of Christ on the cross.
 - This is an example of how the Bible regularly uses types, patterns, and images to give a "foreshadowing" of what is to come later in the Bible. Good literary authors do this in their books, and I mean no irreverence when I say, God is the best author. The best examples of types or examples of foreshadowing are the ones that God himself uses.
- In one sense, the whole Bible is about God redeeming his people. Revelation 5:9 celebrates Christ as the Lamb of God: "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation."

Verse 25: The atoning sacrifice of Jesus is the source of God's righteousness

- *Whom God put forward*: this is the idea of displaying publicly. God the Father publicly declared that sins are forgiven once and for all for everyone who believes in him, and he offers that forgiveness through means of the shed blood of Jesus.
 - When the Cubs won the World Series in 2016, the next day I took a random broom handle and attached it to our house in Alabama so I could display my Cubs "W" flag. I had never done that before, and I have never done that since. I think it actually fell down after a few hours—I was in a bit of a hurry when I put it up. But what was I doing? I was "putting forward" or "publicly displaying" a sign of victory.
 - When Jesus was hanging on the cross with his blood dripping to the earth below him, God was publicly displaying his own son as the means to dealing with sin definitively.
- *As a propitiation by his blood*: this means that Jesus himself was a sacrifice (someone who died in our place) to satisfy God's wrath. Romans 1-3 loudly proclaims that the wrath of God is revealed against the sin of mankind, those whom God created to declare his glory but instead who turned against God in rebellion. When God saves us, he doesn't do that by just forgetting about our sin and saying "it's no big deal," the way we often minimize sin when someone sins against us. God doesn't erase his wrath, he transfers it from us to Christ.
 - The wrath of God is probably not anyone's favorite subject, but what God has done with it should delight us as those who are no longer under that wrath!
 - We actually sing about this "propitiation" every time we sing "In Christ Alone." The line specifically says, "And on the cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied." That line of that song is based on the truth of this verse, Romans 3:25.
- *To be received by faith*: the way the wrath of God is transferred from you to Christ is when you believe in Christ alone as the only person who can satisfy God's wrath for you. You certainly can't do that. Frankly, before you were saved, you weren't even interested in doing that! And there are millions of people today who are not interested in having God's wrath toward them satisfied because they don't believe it exists. Friend, please don't draw that foolish conclusion.
- *This was to show God's righteousness*: here Paul is giving the purpose for this sacrificial death of Christ: to demonstrate his righteousness. From the next phrase, it seems Paul is arguing that some could say that God is unjust, because he had "passed over former sins." That's referring to the Old Covenant era in which God waited to pour out his just wrath against sin on Christ. He did that in patience and kindness toward his people.

Verse 26: God himself is just in declaring people righteous

- *It was to show his righteousness at the present time*: this is Paul restating what he has said a moment ago in verse 25.
- *So that he might be just*: God is proving that he has handled sin justly. It was necessary for someone to die for sins. This goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden when God made clothes for Adam and Eve to cover (atone for) them. How did he do that? By killing an animal. That is not explicitly stated, but conservative theologians nearly universally agree on this point. God himself is the one who performed the first sacrifice for sin, in a way that points us toward this greater, true sacrifice on the cross. The point Paul is making is, God is righteous to forgive sins.
- *So that he might be the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus*: not only is God righteous, he is the one who declares sinners righteous. How does that happen? Once

again, the idea of faith appears. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Conclusion:

- Let the redemption that God provides through Christ take your eyes off the concerns of the moment. Those may be financial pressures—situations like where you know that your car could be repossessed if things don't improve. Knowing the gospel doesn't take away that pressure, but it puts it in context. Having your car repossessed is bad, but suffering the wrath of God eternally is far worse. And Christ has, in your place, drank the cup of the wrath of God to the last. This truth sets your concerns in bright contrast.
- Let the forgiveness you as a Christian already have through Christ's death in your place compel you to turn from your sin. Church, do you feel like you have a sin habit that you feel you have to hide so that no one else will know you in your true colors? Can I comfort you with the reality that in the gospel, your darkest sins can be brought into the light, because they were nailed to the cross of Christ? In the gospel, God gives hope that you can be changed, that the strangle hold that sin has around your throat can be released. Please, don't go another day with that miserable existence. Talk to one of us as your elders. Talk to another mature believer who can walk side by side with you. Knowing you don't have to hide anymore is actually a relief, not an added burden.
- Sandra McCracken wrote a song called, "Mary Consoles Eve."

*Eve, my sister
The one who took the fall
Eve, my sister
Mother of us all
Lift up your head
Don't hide your blushing face
The promised One
Is finally on His way*

*Eve, it's Mary
Now I'm a mother too
The child I carry
A promise coming true
This baby comes to save us from our sin
A servant King, His kingdom without end*

*He comes to make his blessings flow
As far and wide as the curse is found
He comes to make His blessings flow*

- Praise God, from whom all blessings flow, that Mary gave birth to the promised one—the one who makes it so that you don't have to hide your blushing face!

Title: Free From the Law

Text: Galatians 3:1-14

FCF: It is easy for Christians to misunderstand the benefits of the gospel.

Big idea: Because salvation is a gift by God's grace alone, the OT law does not contribute to our salvation.

Date preached: March 14, 2021 (sermon 7 of 10)

Overall goal: to clarify the use of the law in light of redemption through Christ.

Author's aim: to compel his readers to stay the course on the gospel and not feel pressure to earn God's favor or secure their standing before him through their performance.

Scripture intro:

- Please turn in your Bible to Galatians 3.
- A pastor in North Carolina who is also a prolific author named Kevin DeYoung summarizes the story of the Bible this way in a children's book he wrote a few years ago: "This is the story of a man and a woman who lived in a beautiful garden. It's the story of a snake who tricked mankind for thousands of years. It's the story of God and his promises. It's the story of one who's coming back to crush the head of the snake to give us that home we once had and might have forgotten we lost."
- As you listen to that, you recognize that we are actually living in that story right now. We aren't at the end yet. We're not yet in "the home we once had." But we're heading there.
- One fact that can be missed in that summary, though, is that the story has some major turning points. One of those turning points is that Jesus died on a cross. We talked about that last week and we looked closely at some of the implications of his death. But something that passage did not address is that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament law. That fact significantly affects our understanding of the Bible as a whole. What does that mean for us as Christians? That's what our passage today talks about. Let's **read Galatians 3:1-14**.

Sermon intro:

- A number of years ago a Christian author told the story of he and his wife going to Russia to pick up their two new sons from an orphanage. He described . . .
- What those boys were struggling with, at least on one level, was understanding what it meant to have a new standing. They were no longer orphans; they were sons. And that changed everything.
- **FCF:** It is easy for Christians to misunderstand the benefits of the gospel.
- We as Christians also have a new standing. We are still sinners, yes, but we are redeemed sinners. All those who have been converted—who have repented and believed the gospel—have a new standing before God. And that has definite implications for our lives. We have a new standing, and a new title, and that changes everything.
- The passage we just read addresses this problem of misunderstanding the benefits of the gospel. One of the spiritual benefits of being justified by grace through faith is that we are no longer under the law. Our relationship to the law is now completely different than those who were living under the Old Covenant. What is the basic idea of this passage? **Because salvation is a gift by God's grace alone, the OT law does not contribute to our salvation.**
- It is unlikely that that statement is controversial with any of us. And that should be encouraging. We're all seeking to be faithful to God's word, and because of that, we have a remarkable amount of agreement even on an issue as challenging as this one.

Sermon body:

- The main gist of this passage is very simple. Salvation is a work of God's grace alone. *Jesus + nothing = everything*. Now Paul wants you to know three truths about that salvation in this passage.

1. Salvation is a gift of God received by faith (1-6)

2. Salvation is how God fulfills his promise to Abraham (7-9)

3. Salvation is accomplished apart from obedience to the law (10-14)

Let's take these in order. Verses 1-6: salvation is a gift of God received by faith.

- Paul is having an imaginary conversation with Christians in a place called Galatia. They were living there nearly two thousand years ago. Paul was seeking to help these Christians handle a theological controversy that was threatening to undo all of his work in establishing a church, an outpost of the gospel, in that spiritually destitute place.
- It's only an "imaginary" conversation in that no one is actually verbally responding to Paul's questions. But he knows what they would say, because he taught them the gospel himself, so he knows what they believe.
- If you haven't read Galatians recently, Paul's tone may shock you. Right as we start the passage, he calls them "foolish." What would elicit such a bold statement? I mean, there are very few times I can remember telling someone, "what you are doing is foolish." I reserve that statement for special occasions. ☺
- Paul also asks a hypothetical question that will make his first readers of this letter realize just how serious of a situation they are in. "Who has bewitched you?" We might say something like "do you realize that guy is pulling the wool over your eyes?" It's as if you have fallen under the spell of some conspiracy theory and now you see everything through a false lens that distorts reality.
- When Paul says that Jesus was "publicly portrayed," that's likely a way of saying that through his preaching they came face to face with Christ.
 - John Newton wrote a song called, "I saw one hanging on a tree." He didn't actually see him, but he was considering it so intently it was as if he were there in front of the cross himself.
- So Paul is making his readers contemplate what we discussed last week from Romans 3, that Christ's death on the cross accomplished God's saving work.
- The question in v 2 is also quite confrontational. The people know what the answer is. They would say, "of course, we received the Spirit by hearing with faith." To "receive the Spirit" is simply talking about the moment of conversion, when someone turns in faith to Christ and the Spirit indwells them. Every Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit.
- In Paul's mind, he knows that they will answer with "by the Holy Spirit, not by works of the law." By "works of the law" he means they are obeying the law God gave to Moses, especially with regards to works like circumcision.
- Since Paul knows they will answer with "by the Spirit," he helps these Christians see just how far they have drifted and how badly they have been deceived. You obviously begin the Christian race by the power of the Spirit when he gives you new life when you turn in faith to Christ. To "be perfected" here in v. 3 is to grow in spiritual maturity. To grow in Christlikeness. The technical term for this is "progressive sanctification," which simply means that we enter into a process of spiritual growth that begins at conversion and continues till we die. This process is gradual and it is often imperceptible.
 - When my boys leave for school at 8:15 in the morning, they come home at 3:00 in the afternoon looking exactly the same as when they left. And guess what? I don't mind that at all. I never examine them when they walk in the door and say "why didn't you grow over the last seven hours? What's wrong with you?!" That

would be obnoxious and unrealistic. But if I look at pictures of what they looked like a year ago, the change is startling. Actually all I need to do is look at the length of their pants. But it tells the same story—they are growing, I just can't notice it on a moment by moment basis. I notice it over time by stepping back and looking at them more generally.

- This is how our spiritual growth is as well. Most of the time, we can't see that someone has changed spiritually until we compare who they are today with who they were several years ago. But don't be discouraged by that! Do you stand outside and check to see if your oak trees are bigger this year? No, but that's because the way mature oak trees grow is often not visible to us.
- So Paul is saying, “do you really think that you become Christians in one way, but you grow as Christians in a completely different way?”
- In v. 4, Paul asks another rhetorical question. Was all that pointless? But as you read v 4, the question you want to ask is, “*what* exactly did these people ‘suffer,’ or ‘experience’?” (The word can have either meaning, and theologians debate which meaning Paul intended here.) The answer is probably that they have probably been experiencing the same normal persecution that Christians experienced in every place where it was cropping up in the early church.
- It's important for us to remember that churches weren't popping up in places where people had no religious beliefs. It was cropping up in places where people regularly worshiped other gods in temples, regularly gave offerings to appease those gods, and where people lived their lives in fear of what their gods would do if they displeased them. So when Christianity was introduced in a new city by someone like Paul or his fellow workers, it was typically met with resistance and skepticism and mockery.
 - Imagine if every time you walked into church, there were small crowds of people out in the front lawn demeaning Christians, calling you names, and saying you were fools for coming in here to worship a person who died on a cross in public shame two thousand years ago. And those crowds are there every Sunday just to mock you and make you feel shame for your beliefs. How long would you endure that?
- While that's not necessarily the way Christians were persecuted, they were truly persecuted. Paul is saying, “did you endure all that resistance a few years ago, just to throw it all away now when the going got tough?” If you received the gospel of salvation as a free gift apart from any contribution on our part, and now renounce it by obeying the works of the law (again, such as by being circumcised, which was a major letter this issue was addressing), you endured that suffering and persecution completely in vain. It was worthless. He's saying that your faith in Christ is futile if you don't keep believing till the end.
- By adding the phrase, “if indeed it was in vain,” he's saying “I don't know for a fact that it was in vain. That's really up to you and whether you give in to the pressures to succumb to this false teaching.”
- Verse five gives us the sixth question that Paul asks in this short passage so far. Does God give salvation (that's what he means by “he who supplies the Spirit and works miracles”—that's a reference to God) because you obey the law, or because you respond with faith to hearing the gospel?
 - Before we get to Paul's answer, can I just ask you, Christian, when was the last time someone had to evaluate their standing before God because of a conversation they had with you? In other words, when was the last time you shared the gospel with someone? When we do that, we don't just tell them,

- “Jesus loves you.” We tell them that, but then we say, “because of that, you need to repent and believe the gospel.”
- I will tell you, this topic is on every single elders meeting agenda that we have. We ask each other, how are you doing in evangelism? And so now I’m asking you a question that I ask and answer every month. How are you doing in sharing the gospel? When you meet someone and you start talking with them, does it cross your mind that you are talking to a soul that will live somewhere forever? Are you beginning to funnel the conversation toward Christ? If so, we praise God for that! If not, the Lord calls us all to faithfully invite sinners to follow him. We do that by calling them to respond with faith. We as your elders urge you to do that as well. One good way to do that is to carry the “Two Ways to Live” gospel booklets with you so you are always able to give someone a booklet as a follow up to what you talked about with them. Keep them in your purse, or backpack, or briefcase, or in the console of your car, or in any number of other places.
 - Again, Paul is asking a rhetorical question. The question is, “does salvation come from God because you hear the gospel and respond in faith, or because you keep his law?” And the answer the Galatian people knew to give was “we are saved by faith in Christ.” That’s what Paul wants them to be acknowledging.
 - Verse 6 is a way of saying that we are saved by faith, the same way Abraham was saved by faith. Abraham was not righteous before God because he obeyed God. He was righteous by faith, not obedience. That’s how we are declared righteous as well. Paul is quoting Genesis 15:6, which like Genesis 3:15 (which we studied a few weeks ago) is a load-bearing verse in the Bible.
 - We don’t have time to go into detail about Genesis 15, but the emphasis there is that Abraham was saved from his sins because he believed God, and God therefore declared him righteous before him. And the point Paul is making here by referring to that passage is exactly the same: we as Christians are saved from our sins because we believe God and God therefore declares us righteous before him.
 - And Paul knew that the Galatians were agreeing with him. He’s building an argument here with them. Leading them from point A, to point B, to point C.

2. Salvation is how God fulfills his promise to Abraham (7-9)

- In v 7 Paul clarifies that the true “sons of Abraham” are those who have the same kind of faith he had—faith in the promises of God. The way some people believed was that you were a “son of Abraham” if you were Jewish—you were part of his actual family tree.
 - A lot of people take great pride in their family lineage. Some people spend hours researching their family history and can see that many generations ago they had relatives who accomplished great work and made a major difference in their communities. Jewish people were especially proud of their claim to be sons of Abraham.
- Paul himself was Jewish by birth, so he understands this kind of thinking. He was a proud proponent of the Jewish faith. What he’s saying is no knock on Abraham or his fellow Jewish countrymen. What he’s doing by making this kind of statement is simply saying he has understood his Bible well. He understands the flow of salvation history. He understands that even back in Genesis 12, God was “preaching the gospel (v 8) to Abraham by saying that the true children of Abraham are those who share the faith of Abraham and are united to the true seed of Abraham, which v. 16 says is Christ himself.

- This is why the old children’s song says that “Father Abraham had many sons. I am one of them, and so are you.” That’s not true because we are Jewish. We are Abraham’s children because we have faith like Abraham in the Promised One who came from Abraham’s family line.
- Verse 9 is Paul simply summarizing his argument to this point: your faith in Christ means you are a recipient of God’s blessings to Abraham. If it sounds like I’m being repetitive, it’s because Paul is being repetitive. He’s saying the same truth, as if someone were playing a song on a CD and hit the “repeat track” button. It’s going to keep playing the same song. That’s what Paul is doing.

To summarize, here’s where we are so far: Christians belong to God because we receive the Holy Spirit at conversion. All those who have become God’s children by faith are Abraham’s children. What does the next section tell us?

3. Salvation is accomplished apart from obedience to the law (10-14)

- This section reminds us that Paul is building a case against people who teach something very different than what he has just explained. What were those opponents saying? That you are blessed by God by keeping the Old Testament law. No, actually you are blessed because you have faith, not because you keep the law. His argument is that simple. The fact this passage is 14 verses could make it seem complicated, but it’s actually straightforward.
 - If you are here as a non-Christian here today, let me first say, we are so glad you are here. We would love for you to come every single Sunday. We would love for you to ask us questions and observe what we do, and we would be eager to do whatever we can to serve you. But if this passage sounds strange to you, like it’s too simple to “just believe” without contributing anything to salvation yourself, I understand why you would say that. I think a lot of us feel guilty accepting something from someone without actually giving a little bit in return. Maybe your spouse takes you on a special date or gives you a surprise trip that they have been saving up for for many years. When someone does something like that for us, we typically want to repay them in some way. But the gospel cuts against that instinct. The Bible is crystal clear that we are saved as a gift from God alone. It is “not of works, so that no one can boast.” No one can ever say “I’m saved because I helped save myself.” We can only say, “I’m saved because God gave me a gift I didn’t deserve.” If you would like to talk about that some more, please talk to any one of our members afterwards and we would be delighted to show you from the Bible what the Bible says about salvation and how you can even be saved, no matter what you have done or what has been done against you.
- Now back to our text. We will look at this unit only briefly so we can then draw some applications to our lives. What we need to note in v. 10-13 is that Paul is quoting four OT passages, one in each verse.
 - Again, this is like a math teacher saying “you need to show me your work. Don’t just give me the right answer, show me how you got there.” And the way Paul “shows his work” is by showing that what he is saying is consistent with the OT.
- The passages he uses build his case that the law and faith are incompatible. Since that is true, those who rely on the law to be saved are cursed. But you don’t have to endure that curse, because Christ himself did for you.

- Faith in Christ leads to blessing; obedience to the law leads to a curse. If you want to be saved by keeping the OT law, you are under a curse, not the blessing of Abraham. Verse 14 will tell us that the blessing of Abraham is summarized in receiving the “promised Spirit.” If you want to be blessed by trying to obey the law, you will actually be cursed, because everyone disobeys God’s law. The only person who has obeyed the law is Christ, which is why he is the only one who can “redeem us from the curse of the law” in v. 13.
- The law does not save us or change us. This is the clear implication of all Paul has said in this passage.

As one form of application, what should we as Christians do when we read the OT law?

Let me give you four general principles. If you have specific questions, I’d be happy to talk to you at any time.

1. *Acknowledge that not all Christians agree on this question.* This is a basic place to begin, but it’s where we have to start. I think we probably all know Christians about whom we would say, “I can’t believe that person believes that.” For instance, most of us here would probably say, “I can’t believe those Christians believe that babies should be baptized.” Well, there are many Christians who are convinced of that position. Most of us would say, “I can’t believe those Christians think that the only Bible that faithfully preserves God’s word is the King James Version.” There are hundreds of thousands of Christians who believe that. And for some of us, we are so convinced of our theological systems that we would have a hard time understanding how a person who loves God and his word could come to a conclusion different than our own. Sometimes we’re so convinced because it’s all we’ve ever known. For others, at some point in your life perhaps you flip-flopped from one extreme and went straight to the other, and you have such a distaste for your old position that now you are rooted in your current one just because of how much you dislike the other. C.S. Lewis warns against this, saying we should not let an extra dislike for one error push us into the opposite error. So very specifically: maybe you have such a strong dislike for those who see Israel and the Church as one entity (Covenant Theology) that you can’t stand anyone who would see them as almost completely separate entities (Dispensationalism). I would urge you to not let your theological system be such an immovable force in your mind that you would never be willing to reconsider or even read a book by someone who disagrees with you on this issue. In general, the more we disagree with a fellow Christian about a tough question, the more we need to pursue Christlike love and humility in those conversations.
2. *Rejoice that Christ perfectly obeyed the law and fulfilled it.* As the only sinless person, we can hope in no one else. When we put our faith in his finished work, his obedience to the law becomes our obedience. I don’t know of any Christian who would disagree that Christ is the only one who perfectly obeyed the law. The point of disagreement is generally on what it means that he fulfilled the law, or perhaps even more, what parts of the law he fulfilled.
3. *Recognize that in the New Testament, you are under “the law of Christ,” rather than the OT law.* The “law of Christ” is summarized in Galatians 6:2 and as “bear one another’s burdens.” I believe that is another way of simply saying “love one another,” and we show that love by living as Christ himself did, which is what Paul means by “the law of Christ.” That means we typically don’t draw an apples to apples comparison when we

read OT laws. Again, this can be complex, and we don't have time for that today, but we can generally say that as New Covenant Christians, we are not obligated to obey Old Covenant laws. Which leads us to number four:

4. *Though you do not live under the OT law, consider what the OT laws teach about the nature of God.* God has revealed himself as a holy God. He has called us as his people to be holy as he is holy. That means you are not free to live however you want. Paul did not live in a sexually immoral way so that he could share the gospel with sexually immoral people. Saying "I can live however I want so that I can share the gospel with people" is actually itself antithetical to that gospel you seek to proclaim.
 - a. If you would like to read about this, a Baptist theologian named Jason DeRouchie has about a thirty-page article on how Christians understand and apply the OT law. I'd be happy to get you a copy of that content if you would like it.

Conclusion:

- End of orphanage story
- Rejoice that Christ has perfectly fulfilled God's law on our behalf. Let's pray.

Title: Spiritual Conflict

Text: Daniel 3:1-30

FCF: The God-hating world calls for us to bow before its demands and priorities.

Big idea: Only God's kingdom lasts forever. Align yourself wholeheartedly with his kingdom!

Date preached: March 21, 2021 (sermon **8 of 10**)

Overall goal: to expose the theme of spiritual conflict, particularly regarding the seed of the woman/seed of the serpent throughout the Bible.

Scripture intro:

- Please turn in your Bible to the book of Daniel, chapter 3.
- We are heading down the homestretch of our series on how the whole Bible fits together. We are seeing that the Bible tells one unified story, written by one divine Author. Next week we will look at the glorious end of the story in Revelation, and then a week after Easter we will look at some practical ways to become better Bible readers.
- Today, though, we will be studying a story that is likely familiar to you. The reason I included it in this series is because I think it contributes an important concept that runs from Genesis 3 till the end of the story. That is the concept of spiritual conflict. The idea that as Paul says, we are at battle not against flesh and blood, but against an unseen enemy.

Sermon introduction:

- A few summers ago, the Chicago Cubs traded for a player, Daniel Murphy, to shore up a struggling offense in time for the playoffs. Daniel Murphy is a devout Christian, and as such, he had made comments several years before this that he believed that marriage should be between one man and one woman.
- When the news broke that the Cubs had traded for him in July, many fans were irate. It didn't matter that he would go on to jumpstart the Cubs' offense that year. Some Cubs fans said he is a "hateful person," and wanted nothing to do with him.
- Murphy has never lived down his comments. Likely, fans and the media will never be satisfied with what he says from now on. But even if he eventually says just the right words, he'll still be labeled as someone who had to grow out of his hateful convictions.
- Daniel Murphy's stand against the world's interpretations and priorities is part of what it looks like in our day to believe that only God's kingdom will last forever, and that all other rival kingdoms will one day fade away. He is a reminder that **the God-hating world calls for us to bow before its demands and priorities.**
- In our passage today, we learn about three men who viewed God's kingdom as eternal, and we'll see them at odds with someone who saw his own kingdom as supreme.

The context of Daniel 3:

- Before we start studying this specific text, let me make some remarks about studying the book of Daniel as a whole. This will take a few minutes, but I think it will help you understand this text as well as the whole book of Daniel, and also give you some principles for reading other books of the Bible.
- The best way to read Daniel, at least at first, is to read it in one sitting several times. The only way to really get at what this story in chapter 3 is here to do is by understanding the

message of the whole book of Daniel. We can't just cherry pick our favorite stories out of a book of the Bible and assume the context says nothing about how we interpret those stories. But you're probably aware: Daniel is really intimidating! The second half of the book especially is very challenging to interpret.

- When you read a book of the Bible in one sitting, you notice that **key words** start to jump off the page at you. In this case, the words "King" and "Kingdom" will stand out to you; those words are used more times in this book than any other in the OT.
- You'll also see **repeated phrases and ideas**. You'll probably notice a **basic outline** of the book (chapters 1-6 is one unit; chapters 7-12 is the next). And putting those factors together, you will then see an unmistakable **theme**: that God rules over all. That God is in charge of who is in charge.
- Chapter 3, our text today, fits into the bigger section of chapters 1-6. From the perspective of what God is doing, this unit shows us that God is ruling present events. (By contrast, in chapters 7-12, God is ruling future events.) God, right now, is ruling over all the details of our lives.
- If we isolate chapter 3 from the larger context, our understanding of the message of chapter 3 will be significantly hindered and shortsighted. The main human character in chapter 3 is Nebuchadnezzar, but as always, the main character and hero of the story is God himself.
- Chapters 2-4 is the more specific unit we're in; this is describing the life of Nebuchadnezzar. What does this unit teach us about this man? In a dream in chapter 2, he dreams of an image in which he's represented by the head, which is made of gold.
- The book of Daniel is contrasting the many kingdoms of the earth with the only kingdom that will last forever, the kingdom of God.
- One of the most obvious points you walk away with after reading through Daniel from beginning to end a couple of times is that a kingdom will come, and be very powerful for a time, but it will be defeated by another kingdom. That cycle will repeat itself over and over again. But another reality that begins to unfold before your eyes when you read it this way is that while those kingdoms come and go, God's kingdom remains forever. That refrain is repeated continually.
- In chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar has a **dream** that Daniel interprets for him, even though Nebuchadnezzar can't even remember what the dream was. He just knows it was very disturbing. He's ready to kill all the wise men in the kingdom, including Daniel and his three friends, but then Daniel learns from the Lord what the dream is.
- But after learning the interpretation of his dream, in chapter 3 Nebuchadnezzar creates an image, an idol. He does this as an act of self-worship. We don't actually know what the image looked like, but it was clearly a way to get people to worship Nebuchadnezzar. Likely the image was of his face or of his body.
- In chapter 4, he has **another dream**. From that we learn he's going to go insane for a period of time. He's going to eat grass like a cow.
- So chapter 3 fits between two dreams. It's making a statement about the life of Nebuchadnezzar. This phrase is repeated several times: "till you know that the Most High rules over the kingdom of men." In other words, "until you know that you are not God."
- To summarize, chapters 2-4 is about Nebuchadnezzar learning he is not God. That is a very difficult lesson for him to learn. Chapter 3 shows us what it looks like when he tries to act like God. He's trying to say, I'm God; bow to me. He does this by creating a wicked law. Let's **read v. 1-7** to see what that law was.

V 1-7:

- These verses set the stage for the rest of the story.
- The text actually doesn't tell us what the image that was created looks like, but we know it was made out of gold, and we know from his dream in chapter 2 that he represented the head of the image, and that the head was made out of gold. So it's possible here that he was not satisfied with that dream and wanted to rebel against what Daniel said the dream meant. He wasn't satisfied with just the head being of gold, indicating that his kingdom will at one point end; he wanted to show that his kingdom would last forever, and he would demand the reverence and worship of all people.
- So he called together all of the local and national officials to celebrate himself. He wanted everyone to see and know that he was the greatest. And there was no lack of clarity about when the people were to bow down. The combination of instruments, whatever they would look like today, made it abundantly clear when it was the right time to get down on your faces and show your reverence for the greatest kingdom in the world. Or at least, the greatest human kingdom.
- This location is probably very close to where original Tower of Babel was. That story was about people worshiping some other God, saying "we're better than God." That's exactly what Nebuchadnezzar is doing here.
- The image was *set up*. This word occurs 9 times. This might not seem like a big deal except in Daniel 2, Daniel recognizes that God "sets up" kings. In 2:44, the God of heaven will "set up" a kingdom. Here Nebuchadnezzar sets up his own idol. God is the one who really sets up a kingdom; Nebuchadnezzar is full of pride and wants the worship for setting up a kingdom.
- This is set up *for worship*, we see 11 times. He doesn't want just any old person worshiping his idol; he wants the important people there. Similar to the State of the Union address: if you're somebody in government, you're probably there.
- Let's now **read v. 8-12** to see whether everyone followed through on the king's orders.

8-12:

- Here, Daniel's friends, who were only mentioned in previous chapters in passing, are brought to the forefront of the story. So the king's servants come before the king with what surely was disturbing news. The way they framed the news makes it even more personal than they probably needed to. They said that these three men disregarded the king. But we don't actually get to the tension till v. 12.
- The three men are framed and portrayed as disrespectful and ungrateful rebels.
- These Chaldean tattle-tales come and say, these guys you've put in authority aren't doing what you told them to do. We see in these reporters an example of misplaced priorities, of a misplaced understanding of what is true and important. One pastor writes that "the world regards the evil of idolatry as goodness and the goodness of devotion to Yahweh as evil." This section of this story is an example of that truth.
- How do you think the king would respond to the news that not everyone is bowing down to his idol, or to his command? Let's **read v. 13-15** to see.

13-15:

- We see the first instance of the king’s problem with anger. He was in rage and he called these three men to come before him. He asked them for clarification, though the way it’s written, at least, he didn’t even give them a chance to reply and defend themselves. But he did give them one more chance to bow down the next time the music played. There was another opportunity coming for these men to do what everyone in their right minds would do. At least that was the way Nebuchadnezzar looked at it!
 - He gives them a second chance, but it’s probably because of self-love. I want 100% loyalty! As if to say, “99.99% of the people worshipping me is not enough.”
- What are we to make of Nebuchadnezzar’s pride and false worship? We can look at it this way: if the Bible could be summarized as a history-long war between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15), Nebuchadnezzar represents the seed of the serpent, and the three Hebrew men beautifully stand out as representing the seed of the woman, who will triumph over the serpent on the last day. Those aligned with the Serpent often look powerful, but are eventually exposed as being powerless.
- Nebuchadnezzar was telling them, “pledge your allegiance to me!” Christians, we pledge allegiance to Jesus Christ and his kingdom, and none other!
- The next section tells us how these three men respond to the king’s command.

16-18 (read text):

- These three men weren’t in the least bit swayed by the king’s instructions. They didn’t care what he thought or what he threatened. They were simply intent on honoring God and obeying the command that God’s people not bow before any image (Exod. 20:4-5). They were not nasty in what they said. But they were blunt. They were not wavering. They were convinced of what they believed and of who their God was.
- They knew from Israel’s history that God can do astounding miracles whenever he wants. They weren’t sure that this was one of those times, but that didn’t matter. They didn’t refuse to worship because they thought that God would rescue them from the flames; they refused to worship because they were set on being faithful to their God. They knew God was the king, and the only king, and they knew the reality that his kingdom is the only one that lasts forever. They knew Nebuchadnezzar was only a pawn in God’s hands.
- So while they didn’t know *what* God would do, they did know what God *can* do. He is “able to deliver.” But they didn’t presume to read the mind of God. Instead they left their lives in God’s hands, and chose to obey rather than simply please another man. Because in the end, that’s all Nebuchadnezzar was—someone made in the image of God.
- These men were familiar with Psalm 63, so they knew that whether God delivers us or not, he is better than life itself (Ps. 63:3).
- These men said, “We want one reality to be crystal clear: your god is not worthy of our worship.” Notice how in Matthew 10, God will give you the words to say when you are dragged before rulers as part of being persecuted. It’s possible Jesus had this very passage in mind when he said that!

19-23 (read text):

- If we got a hint of the fact that Nebuchadnezzar was an angry man in v. 13, that message is now loud and clear in verse 19. It affected his facial expression. Perhaps his veins were popping out of his neck, and his face turned red and his hands tightened and his brow was lowered and he threw something at the ground and stomped his foot.

- We see the ugly reality that sin makes a fool out of all of us. When was the last time you sinned and you were proud of it, like, “wow, that made me look really good”? Sin ruins us. This is the result of the fall in Genesis 3.
- He was so mad he wasn’t thinking clearly anymore, which is an experience probably all of us have had at some point. He lost his mind. So he got his best soldiers to crank up the heat using whatever means necessary to make it as hot as possible. Then he got his best soldiers to tie up these three men and cast them into the fire. The flames were so hot that the king sacrificed his best soldiers to get these three men in the fire. His soldiers died, so the problem wasn’t that the fire wasn’t hot enough. The problem is that Nebuchadnezzar’s hand-crafted god is nothing compared to the one who created fire.

24-25:

- V 24-25 tells us that the king was astounded. He saw something that he never expected to see in his life. And for the greatest king in the world at that time, that’s saying something. He had seen untold riches and unparalleled beauty, but here he sees something that took him off his throne. It made him stand up with utter shock. Instead of seeing three men tied up, he saw four men walking around. Instead of them tied up, now they’re loose, and they’re not hurt by the fire.
- Who did Nebuchadnezzar actually see?
 - The text doesn’t actually say; it could be an angel. Likely it’s a preincarnate image of Christ. One of the reasons you come to that conclusion is because of the literary connection to Daniel 7:13, “someone like the Son of Man.” Both instances are pointing to Christ. The point is clear though; Isaiah 43:7, “when you walk through the fire, you will not be burned.” The response to that? “Fear not; I am with you.” These men probably knew that Scripture passage and may have had it running through their minds!
 - The ministry of theology: the truth of God ministers to you in your trials.

26-30:

- In verse 26 the king get as close as he safely can to the door of the furnace and called out to the three men to come out of the flames. They did that, and he and all of his highest officials who were around him noticed that there was no way to tell that these people had just come out of a fiery furnace. They didn’t look like it, smell like it, or seem phased in any other way. This reminds us, in some sense at least, of the fact that when we are with the Lord, there will be no evidence of the sting of death or the victory of the grave. Because Jesus has conquered death, we too can walk out of the grip of eternal death and we will forever celebrate that God himself has rescued us from the flames that we deserve for our sin. The author makes it clear, in beautiful detail, that the fire had no effect whatsoever.
 - If you are here today and you are not a Christian, this passage calls you to trust in the person who has conquered death and sin, and turn to him for eternal life. See the vanity of worshiping any other god, and rely on Christ alone for your salvation from your sin.
- Think about the witnesses to this scene. All the important people who were there to worship a false God? Now they’re confronted with the true God.

- Nebuchadnezzar's theology develops in chapter 4. Here he's just an astounded man; in chapter 4 he's probably a saved man. But the power of God results in his praise from this wicked man.
 - God is honored when people are willing to give their freedom and their very lives for his sake.
- Nebuchadnezzar's worshipful response to what he has experienced in these moments, praising the only true God, reminds us that even the wrath of man will praise God (Ps. 76:10). What he recognizes is that these men trusted in God because their God was better than his god, and their God's kingdom would last longer than his own.
- Though he was yet to say that there was only one true God, he was able to recognize that no one should be blaspheming the God of these three men who have just been miraculously saved. And then he promoted these men (perhaps superstitiously) and gave them even more authority in his kingdom.

So what is the message of chapter 3?

- **Only God is sovereign. Only God's kingdom lasts forever. Align yourself unwaveringly and unashamedly with God's kingdom.**
- Align yourself with God. Stand in the kingdom of God rather than the kingdom of the world. Turn in faith and repentance to him. That requires that we denounce all other kingdoms, especially the kingdom of this world.
- God will overcome all those opposed to his purposes. He will deliver his people and judge his enemies. Those opposed to God will crumble!
- These men understood what Jesus would say 500 years later: "don't fear him who can kill the body, but fear God" (Matt. 10:28).
- One way we can describe in NT terms with these three men did is that they refused to love the world. 1 John 2 gives the paradigm for Christians to stop loving the world. One of the reasons to stop loving the world is that "the world is fading away." That sounds very similar to me to the reality that only God's kingdom will last forever! All the glory that the world has built up for itself one day will be smashed.
 - It's like someone creating an extravagant ice sculpture that requires hours and hours of work. It takes years and years of practice to be able to create some of what these people do. But then suddenly the temperature gets above freezing, and what was once so amazing is now a large puddle. Yet we stand and look and take pictures and post them on Instagram and tell our friends about all the amazing ice sculptures. But just remember. It will still one day only be a puddle.
- But let us not lose sight of one of the obvious lessons of this story we have worked our way through today: believing that only God's kingdom will last forever, and therefore devoting your life only to his kingdom, will mean that the kingdom of this world will likely hate you. This will perhaps show up by people saying that your Christian beliefs are irrelevant or intolerant or hateful. So be it.
 - There is no excuse for being ugly or mean in saying what God has made clear in Scripture. But those who express their Christian beliefs and convictions with clarity, compassion, and love bring glory to God and can be used to open the eyes of sinners.

Applications:

- Repent of the idolatry in your heart.

- When we think of Daniel 3, who do we want to identify with? I'm Shadrach, how about you? No, you're Nebuchadnezzar!
- I want my Saturdays to be productive, entertaining, and enjoyable, not necessarily in that order. Take that away, and I can be quite a jerk! How about you? In what ways do you see your own idolatry?
- Consider and repent of the ways in which you have become acclimated to the world and taken pleasure in what God hates.
- Believe that God provides the grace to resist the siren calls of idolatry (as Jesus himself did!) and love of the world, and the grace to courageously stand for God.
- If you're here as a person exploring Christianity or perhaps uncertain of your standing before God, we call you to believe that Jesus himself took the punishment for your unfaithfulness, but his faithfulness enables your faithfulness.
- This passage is not a "be like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego" kind of passage, because they were still sinners.
- Who, then, is chapter 3 about? It's about God, showing there is one true God. It's about Nebuchadnezzar too, realizing he is not God. After that it's about three men, who were convinced there was a higher throne, a better king. They had built up a previous conviction about who God was, and that enabled them to resist this evil command.

Conclusion: Serve God's Kingdom Alone

- Christians, see through the sparkling images of the world for what they really are.
 - Where is Nebuchadnezzar's golden image now? It was lovely, I'm sure; but it's gone now. The world is alluring, and then quickly passes away. That means that no one and nothing deserves your unbending allegiance except God alone.
- Only God's grace can preserve your faith and keep you from justifying compromise; so pray for grace and courage.
- Pray for Christians facing harsh opposition right now. There are Christians who are being called again and again to fall on their faces to the world's priorities and demands. Those may be Christians in North Korea, in Morocco, or here in our town, people who are told at work to compromise their faith or lose their jobs.
- Martin Luther told us that at times we may die for our faith, but people can only kill our bodies, not God's truth or his kingdom.

Let goods and kindred go,

this mortal life also.

The body they may kill;

God's truth abideth still.

His kingdom is forever.

Title: New Creation: God’s People in God’s Place

Text: Revelation 21-22

FCF: We often lose hope in light of the conflicts and sorrows of life.

Big idea: The Bible gloriously ends with God’s people in God’s place, forever united with him.

Date preached: March 28, 2021 (sermon **9 of 10**)

Overall goal: to describe the glorious ending of the Bible's unified story.

Scripture intro:

- Please turn in your Bible to Revelation 22—the last page of the Bible.
- My goal for this preaching series since late January has been to help us as a congregation take a step toward understanding that the Bible is one book written by one divine Author telling one unified story. The reason we want to do that is because growing in biblical literacy helps us glorify God with our lives, worship him wholeheartedly, and effectively serve him through Christ-centered living.
- As a reminder, at its most basic level, I am defining biblical literacy as *the ability to read the Bible accurately and draw relevant connections between one part of the Bible and another*. Our passage today takes us to the end of the Bible and hopefully, then, helps us see some of those connections I just alluded to.
- Let’s read **Revelation 22:1-5**.

Sermon intro:

- In the summer of 2009, Clarissa and I traveled around states in the southeast with a small group of college students to minister to churches and tell them about the Christian college we worked for. It was a great experience for us, and we learned a lot from some really godly Christians we met throughout the summer.
- One of the lessons I vividly learned, though, was that every person you meet is bearing a unique set of burdens. No two combinations are alike. What we have *experienced in our past* mixes with *burdens in the present* and *concerns about the future*, often leaving us overwhelmed. That summer Clarissa and I met people who had loved ones who had just suddenly died, we went to a church where the pastor had just left home in an adulterous relationship *that very day*, we met people with enormous financial strains, and on Father’s Day, we sat in the home of a couple in North Carolina who had been waiting all day for their children to call. They were hoping they would hear a simple “I love you, thank you for being my dad,” but as we sat there with them, it was beginning to set in that it wasn’t going to happen at all. Another reminder that their relationship with their children was so strained they couldn’t even talk on Father’s Day.
- If you read biographies or history books in general, you know that people experience circumstances that are almost unbelievable. People see horrors they will never forget, receive fatal diagnoses from which they will never recover, and mourn the death of people they will never see again.
- The history of the world is the sad story of people living through heartache and disappointment. As a song in the musical “Alexander Hamilton” relates, “There are moments that the words don’t reach, there is suffering too terrible to name.” Likely, when I say that, you can think of your own experience with sorrow and conflict and it may bring back a palpable sense of loss and grief.
- This is the world in which we live. People get sick, people die, people sin against one another. Who among us does not know the sense of a relationship that will never quite be what it once was because of words that were spoken or deeds that were done against us? This is the world in which we live, but it’s not the world we were intended to live in. This world is not the way it was supposed to be. We know it’s that way because of what

happened in Genesis 3. We read of God making everything perfect in Genesis 1-2, but then the rebellion of man against God brought a curse into the world, the effects of which we are all dealing with every single day. In the midst of these problems, **we often lose hope in light of the conflicts and sorrows of life.**

- But the Bible doesn't leave us there, and doesn't ever tell us to just grin and bear it. The Bible isn't just the story of rebellion. It's the story of redemption—the story of God himself making all things new through the work of Jesus Christ, who died, was buried, and then came back to life. And what we read as we come to the end of the Bible is a beautiful description of what will happen when that redemption, that solution to the world's problems, takes full effect.
- In other words, **The Bible gloriously ends with God's people in God's place, forever united with him.** That's what we see in this passage, Revelation 21-22.

Sermon body:

- It's obviously not possible for us to cover all the details of this large section. So what we will do is summarize this passage into two parts: what this new creation is like, and who is there. Or more simply, God's place, and God's people.
- Let's begin by looking at what this passage teaches us about God's Place.

I. God's Place is the fulfillment of all God intended for the world.

What can we observe about this place?

- God himself is at the center, radiating his glory from his throne. John Piper observes that the reason heaven is so good is that we are with God. Those who get distracted by the street of the city being “pure gold, like transparent glass” (21:21), or by the jewels in the twelve gates, or any of the other features John describes, miss the point.
- Yet we can also observe, God's place is beautiful, with remarkable similarities to Eden: it is safe from all harm, the river of life flows through it, and the tree is at the center.
- It is a city—just as we observed in a previous sermon, Rev 21-22 mentions “city” 14 times by my count; Hebrews 11-13 mentions “city” 5 times, all describing the city where God himself is the maker. As much as I deeply love Chicago, this city is “no lasting city.” Instead, “we seek the city that is to come.”
- There is no curse in that city. All that is wrong with the world now will be completely gone. Christ came to undo the curse. It is the ultimate “Control-Z”—completely wiping out all that is wrong. As Isaac Watts wrote in the hymn we sing at Christmas time, “No more let sins and sorrows grow, Nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make His blessings flow Far as the curse is found.”
- This place is large. What we need to understand by its nature of being a cube is that we are reminded that God created the world as a cosmic temple in which we are with him and are worshipping him directly. The tabernacle and temple were mini versions of what God created the world to be—tiny representations of what it is to dwell with God in perfect holiness.
 - The theme of the temple starts in Eden, in which God creates a place to dwell with his people; but after the fall, God creates the tabernacle and then the temple so that the priest can atone for the sins of the people and offer praises and prayers on their behalf. In the New Testament, Jesus says his body is a temple, and after he dies, the Spirit comes and indwells in all believers, making the church and each of our bodies his temple. But here in this passage, there is no need of a temple, because in 21:22, the Lord himself is the temple. We will finally be with God once again, as it was in Eden.

- God’s place is holy. That’s because he himself is holy. And it’s a reminder, to get ahead of ourselves for just a moment, that the only people in that place are those who are themselves holy. We will talk about that more in a few minutes.

So these last two chapters of the Bible tell us that **God’s Place is the fulfillment of all God intended for the world. These chapters also show us that . . .**

II. God’s People are the fulfillment of all God intended for humanity.

- We talked about the way the world is broken and we mourn the fractured relationships in our lives. Even without sin getting in the way, relationships change over time. When I left home nearly 20 years ago to move away for college, I wasn’t intending to be rude or ungrateful to my parents or my siblings, but it still put a distance between us that was never quite the same as when we were all under the same roof. And again, that’s without me leaving in a huff or saying “good riddance” on my way out the door.
- What I’m saying is that the distance and difficulties of human relationships are obvious to us. Relationships are hard to create, maintain, and patiently persevere through hardships. But that’s not the way God intended for it to be. God intended for humanity to live together in perfect harmony, perfect community. This passage teaches us a great deal about the people of God.

What are some of the ways this passage describes God’s people?

- First of all, in 21:3, “the dwelling place of God is with man.” To be part of the people of God means that you are with God, and away from God’s enemies. This is what Adam & Eve enjoyed in Eden. This is what the nation of Israel wanted—to be safely in the land with God. And this is the eternal privilege of God’s people.
 - This passage is alluding to numerous OT passages using Covenant language, going all the way back to the foundational books of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Exodus 6:7: “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God.” That phrase is repeated throughout the Bible, and here it is again, celebrating the union we have with God himself by his covenant faithfulness.
- Those who belong to God are called by a variety of names in these chapters. Besides being “his people,” we are his son, his servants.
 - “Son of God”—Adam, Israel, David, and Jesus are all called “the son of God” in various passages with a variety of meanings. But here in 21:7, all those in God’s family are identified as God’s children.
- Who are his people? Those who are thirsty but have their thirst quenched by the water of life (21:6); those who are embattled spiritually (like the three Hebrew men last week), but yet who conquer through the grace of Christ (21:7); those who are tempted to yield to temptation to cave, yet who keep the words of his book (22:7, 9); those who are sinful and needy, yet who wash their robes in the blood of Christ (22:14); those who are foul and filthy, yet by saving grace are made righteous and holy (22:11); those who have access to enter the city by the gates—a way of saying you have the blessed privilege of entering (22:14).
 - For about six years or so, every year I have faithfully applied for tickets to the Masters golf tournament in Augusta, Georgia. I’m not the biggest fan of golf anymore, but I absolutely love to watch the Masters, which is probably my one favorite sporting event to watch every year. But getting tickets is very difficult; it is an exclusive club. Even if you drive up to the gates, you aren’t getting in unless you have previous approval. In God’s city, that previous approval is

- granted to those who have been washed in the blood of the lamb. And the reward for getting in is far greater than the reward of getting into Augusta National.
- **Gospel call:** Perhaps you are here as someone who would not identify as a Christian. Or perhaps you would call yourself a Christian, but you still have a lot of questions about whether you can actually know your sins are forgiven and you can have peace with God. This passage is both a gracious warning and a merciful invitation to you. It's a warning in that it is clear that "nothing unclean will ever enter" God's place, "nor anyone who does what is detestable or false." Well the problem is that naturally, from birth, we all do what is detestable and false. We all are spiritually unclean. And the even bigger problem is that there is nothing we can do about it. Even if you by some miraculous human achievement have never missed a Sunday of church, you still are unclean. Even if you were baptized in the past, that does not wash away your sins. Baptism is a picture of your sins being washed away, not the means by which it occurs. Even if you are generous with your money and time, are pro-life, and pray daily, those acts do not and cannot save us. Only someone who has never sinned can be right with God, and only those right with God can enter God's place. So where does that leave you? In God's kindness, he gave his Son Jesus, who never sinned, so that all who trust in him alone then receive his perfect obedience to their account. We urge you to receive that free gift today! Talk to anyone here about this and we would be delighted to explain the gospel even more to you and invite you to repent of your sins and turn in faith to Christ.
 - 21:24, 26; 22:2: The nations—another reminder in Revelation that God's people are not made up of one nation, but of people from every tribe and nation.
 - This is one reason why we as Christians do not get caught up in nationalism. We are part of the one true Christian nation, the church. Only that "nation" lasts forever. As we said from Daniel 3 last week, our true allegiance is to God. Our primary identity is that we are God's people, and that group is made up of people from "the nations."
 - In book of life, his name on foreheads—a way of saying we will belong to him and our allegiance toward and relationship with him will be obvious
 - Will reign with him (cf. Gen. 1:26, 28—have dominion)

Connections to the Old Testament

- Exile is ended (back to Eden before Adam and Eve had to leave God's presence)
- Isaiah 25, Isaiah 65, etc.—OT passages on new creation
- Marriage, temple, worship, kingdom, covenant—all culminate in this passage
- OT quotes & allusions—Isa 55, spring of water; etc.
- The story is still ongoing till this passage is a reality. You are inhabiting the story that the Bible tells. And if we don't understand that we are living in this story, we won't rightly understand the Bible. We will look at it as a way to live the good life, or as if the Bible were God's instruction manual. It has instructions, yes, but the instructions only make sense in light of the larger story.
- This passage shows that the beginning and ending of the Bible are similar, on purpose. How is that possible? It's possible because the Bible is telling one story, written by one divine Author. Yes he used Moses and John 1500 years apart to write the beginning and ends of the story, but he was superintending every part of it so that what we have in our Bibles today is a remarkably unified story of God's redeeming grace.

- Jesus at the center of this passage, just as he is the center of every passage of the Bible. Here he is the Lamb, the one who shed his blood in which we wash our robes, the one who is “the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star” (21:7).
- This passage shows us that the Bible has a truly happy ending—just like every other good story. It is happy because God got what he intended to get, going back to our sermon on the goal of creation. Why did God create the world? **God desired to establish a beautiful temple-city on a holy mountain where he dwells with his holy people in peace and security and where his glory fills the land.**
 - This passage shows that God got exactly what he set out to achieve. The new creation is the place where God’s creation purposes are established.

Conclusion:

- Applications: greater faithfulness in the present; war against sin; endure suffering patiently; bask in what you will be. This passage forces to answer the question, will we be overcomers, or cowards? (21:7-8)
- Kate Middleton being bullied in middle school: imagine if someone could have walked up to her and told her, “don’t be discouraged by what they say and do to you. One day you will literally be married to the prince.” We know what we will be, which enables us to endure today.

Title: Better Bible Reading

Text: Psalm 119:18

FCF: Our hearts are often indifferent to the privilege of reading and understanding the Bible.

Big idea: The Bible is a gracious gift from God and deserves your deepest efforts to accurately and regularly read it.

Date preached: April 11, 2021 (sermon **10 of 10**)

Overall goal: to compel the congregation to read the Bible regularly, knowledgably, and productively.

Scripture intro:

- Please turn in your Bible to Psalm 119. Today we conclude our series on the storyline of the Bible, which we started on January 24. I designed this series to help us all become better readers of the Bible.
- This is the longest unit in the Bible. This psalm could be described in many different ways, but at the very least it is a meditation on the beauty and value of God’s word.
- I will tell you right from the outset that this sermon is not an average sermon. In some ways I hesitate to even call it a sermon. I will be talking about a lot of different passages, but most of what I will say will be very specific suggestions about how to become better at Bible reading. Let me **read Psalm 119:18**, which we will talk about in a few minutes.

Sermon intro:

- You may recall that in the first sermon of this series, I used the example of having an internal map of a city. I mentioned that some of us have better maps of a city than others. Some people can get from one place to another with ease without ever looking at Google Maps, and others get lost or turned around very quickly. In the same way, some people are more comfortable navigating through the Bible. Perhaps you’ve read it your whole life because you grew up in a Christian family, or you have read books about it, or even taken classes about it in college.
- This verse in Psalm 119 that we have just read tells us that when we read the Bible, we are setting our eyes on “wondrous things.” That means, at the very least, that we should look really carefully at what the Bible says. We should put our energy and our time into seeing the “wondrous things” that the Bible holds. What wondrous things does it tell us? It tells us who God is, what he is like, what he has done, is doing, and will do, and how we fit into that. It answers the big questions of life—where we came from, why we’re here, and where we are going. It tells us that we can live for the fame and glory of God, and tells us how to do that in super specific, practical ways. More on Psalm 119.
- In other words, the Bible tells us that we should care about the Bible a lot. It compels us to develop a good working map. We’ve sought to give you a good working map by describing the Bible’s storyline of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. We’ve sought to understand why the world has the problems it has, but also, to show what the solution to those problems is. That solution is salvation through Jesus Christ. And the Bible tells us that when redemption is complete, we will live in God’s kingdom, forever free from the problems of this fallen world. How kind of God to tell us these truths!
- What I am saying is, **The Bible is a gracious gift from God and deserves your deepest efforts to accurately and regularly read it.**

We’ve talked the last few months about developing biblical literacy—the ability to read the Bible with greater understanding. This “sermon” (though it may not feel like a normal sermon) will be very practical with a lot of suggestions for how to help us with the actual

act of reading the Bible. As if you attempt to learn to play a musical instrument or decorate wedding cakes, I look at reading the Bible as both an art and a science, but you probably need to focus on the science before the art, and altogether it's way more of a science than an art.

Before I give these suggestions, please don't assume that I think you are bad at Bible reading. I have plenty of room—more than I'd like to admit—to improve, so this is not a Bible-reading professional talking to inferiors. It's safe to assume we have a variety of Bible-reading skill levels in this room, but no matter how long we have been saved, we can all improve in our reading of God's word.

Keep in mind, we don't read the Bible as a good luck charm. "A verse a day keeps the devil away" doesn't quite ring true. Instead, like prayer and fellowship with the church body, this is a habit of grace—this habit is not about having a good day spiritually, but about rejoicing in God's grace to you and drinking in his grace more deeply.

PRE-BIBLE READING

Now, here are some suggestions to help you even before you open the Bible.

1. **Read on a schedule.** You don't want to have to decide every day where to read, or feel like you have to make a decision. Lots of good Bible reading plans are available, but you can also make your own. You know your own daily life better than anyone else, so you might go heavy on the weekends (say, read all of Hebrews over the weekend, half on Saturday morning and half on Sunday afternoon) and just slowly read through the Proverbs during the week. But whatever you do, perhaps you could have a bookmark or a small reading sticker (even one of the prayer cards or sermon cards could serve that function) so that you always know where you left off the day before.
2. Of course, that assumes you're **using a paper copy of the Bible**—and I actually want to encourage you to do that as well. A tablet or phone can have Bibles on them, of course. But the problem is what ever else you have on them—your calendar, reminders, text messages, the Internet, pictures of a recent fun outing, and on and on. None of those are bad, but they all can be distracting, and our brains love distractions. So use a paper Bible.
3. That leads to a larger point, but certainly related: put your phone away; **remove all distractions.** At the very least, turn your phone to "do not disturb" and put it where your phone is out of sight. Maybe even better, put your phone in a drawer in a separate room so it would take effort to go get it. I don't want to turn this sermon into a rant, but I cannot overstate how much screens affect our Bible-reading habits. I won't go into all that now, but feel free to ask about it. Become self-aware about your reading, browsing, and entertainment habits. I urge you, though, close your computer, turn off the TV and radio, put your phone away, and THEN read your Bible.
 - Recently was driving down La Grange Road and I saw an elderly man sitting in a lawn chair, just staring out at nothing in particular. He appeared completely unincumbered by the concerns of life. He was just enjoying sitting still. This is a good skill to develop—the ability to

embrace and be content with boredom. That ability will actually help us sit still long enough to read the Bible well with concentration.

4. One of the reasons to use a paper Bible is so that you can **mark it**. I know lots of people who are hesitant to write in their Bibles or mark them, but I would actually urge you to mark it up a lot. You can always go buy another Bible! So use a variety of colored pencils, for instance. Maybe you mark something about God in a particular color, and God's promises in another color. I like to use a color to mark everything that quotes or obviously alludes to earlier Scripture. You would be surprised how often the OT quotes other OT passages. Of course, the NT does that as well. The book of Revelation alludes to the OT hundreds of times. So in one Bible I use, every quote or obvious allusion is in orange.
5. Let me give one other way to prepare to read, and then we'll hone in on actually reading. But here, I want to encourage you to **read with a friend**. By that I could mean two different ways, and I actually want to encourage both. I mean to read on a set schedule with a friend, so that you can hold each other accountable. The other way is to literally read with a friend. Have a friend over to your home, have that person bring their Bible (or have an extra copy ready for them), and then take turns reading aloud. This is essentially what we will do Saturday with the book of Ecclesiastes. We could have encouraged you to just read all of Ecclesiastes at home. Why encourage you to make the effort to come here? First, because if you come you'll actually do read it. If you're home you might notice the grass needs to be cut so you'll do that instead. Or you'll start making a pot of coffee and then realize that would go great with a batch of cookies and you'll start doing that. So that's one reason to do it with a friend, is it actually helps you stick to it. The other reason is that then you're feeling connected to other people. This is why it's enjoyable to go to sporting events—you feel camaraderie with the people there, cheering for the same team. In this case, you build camaraderie when you hear someone you love read a passage that is especially meaningful. You might hear someone get choked up when they read a passage that amazes them with God's grace. But what I'm saying is, reading with another person can go a long way in increasing Bible comprehension. David Helm, a pastor downtown, wrote a book called "One-to-One Bible Reading" that goes into this even further and I commend that to you.

BIBLE READING

So what are some practical ways to get the most out of your Bible reading? You've sat down; you've opened your Bible; what now? Here are some suggestions to help you move toward better Bible reading.

1. **Pray for spiritual understanding.** Lord, open my eyes to behold truth about you, about me (that I am a sinner prone to wander), about the world I live in, about what you are doing in the world and in my life and in all of history. Lord, reveal yourself to me through your word. Challenge me, convict me, delight me.
2. **Take notes on what you read.** Maybe you already have a journal, but if not even a basic notebook is often less than a dollar at Walmart or Target. If you want to go crazy you can buy a really nice Moleskin journal for a lot more, but just get

- something you'll use. This helps you remember what you read, reflect, write down questions you want to come back to, or even write out a brief prayer based on what you've read and learned.
3. Maybe you struggle to read. That is fine, and nothing to be ashamed of. In that case, I would urge you to **listen to an audio Bible**. But even if you read well, there is still great benefit in listening to the text being read to you. You can listen while you shave or brush your teeth or get dressed, or while you drive in your car, or wash the dishes, or any number of other times. And as you read a paper Bible, there is often great benefit in reading out loud in stead of just in your head.
 4. Next, I encourage you to **read large portions at a time**, on a regular basis at least. In other words, I certainly agree that there are times and places to read just a few verses of 1 Thessalonians 4. That can be very edifying, and careful study of a narrow text is often richly rewarding. But instead of doing that all the time, maybe a few days a week you could zoom out and read all of 1 Thessalonians. It's only 5 short chapters, and if you alternate from reading a large portion to a small portion, zooming in and then zooming out, you'll gain a greater appreciation for how that book of the Bible fits together, but you'll also understand each of the small passages better as well. Could you read all of Jeremiah in one sitting? Yes, but it will take the average reader probably three or four hours. That's a great investment, but I would start with something a little smaller and work your way up to it. As you do that, you'll begin to see common themes, phrases, and words that help you move toward interpreting the text accurately. Maybe you could try to read through the whole NT over the course of a month. It's very doable for the average reader if you make it a priority in your schedule and develop the habit.
 5. While you're reading, **identify the genre** of what you're reading. In other words, pay attention to how something is written. Is this a story, like Daniel 6? Is this a letter, like 1 Thessalonians? Is this a poetic wisdom section, like Ecclesiastes? Those three genres are very popular in the Bible, and they are all very different from one another, which means you need to have different considerations for each one. Ecclesiastes has a lot more repetition between one line and the next. Letters like 1 Thessalonians will have a more rigid argument, so you would look for key transitional words like "therefore," "because," "if/then," and so on. And usually when you read a narrative section, the passage doesn't tell you explicitly what it is about, but there are often obvious clues, such as at the end of Daniel 6 in King Darius's speech. Another aspect of this is identifying what the larger section of the Bible you're reading is trying to do. Is it advancing the storyline, such as in 1-2 Kings, describing the downfall of the people of God? Or is it reflecting on the storyline, such as in the wisdom books or the NT epistles? One way to think of this is as if you are watching a football game: there are times the announcers tell you what is happening, and then there are times they tell you what has just happened and what it means to the game, to the season standings, and so on. So identify how a passage is written (is it more like an email, or a book of poems, or a newspaper?), and then also what it's doing—is it telling you part of the story, or telling you how to live in light of the story?
 6. **Consider the contexts**. There are always multiple contexts. What is the historical context? Maybe Paul is writing to a church that has been drinking the koolaid of

false teaching. Maybe David is writing while he is running for his life from his own son, as in Psalm 3. Maybe God's people are about to cross into the promised land and are fearful about what they will experience along the way. That context matters. But there's also the near context of a passage—what came just before this passage? What comes just after? And there's the far context, and that includes the very farthest context of how a passage fits into the message of the whole Bible. I urge you to consider as many of those as you can at one time. A good study Bible will help with this, as will a variety of other basic resources, many of which are available for free online. But what you want to remember is that we can't make a passage mean something that the author himself wouldn't have meant by it. A common favorite verse for non-Christians is "judge not that you be not judged." But that doesn't mean to not be discerning. It doesn't mean to let people just live in sin. Too many other passages tell us to "exhort one another" and "rescue the wandering." So the larger contexts will typically help us know what a passage means, rather than just reading a statement in isolation.

7. **Read and re-read the text.** Very rarely is a passage so easily understood that you can identify the meaning clearly the first time you read it. Repetition in reading makes a huge difference, and you may even use multiple translations in your reading. I often alternate in my reading between the ESV, NASB, NIV, and occasionally one or two more.
8. **Look for repetition in the passage**—this may be repeated words and phrases, such as in Isaiah 9 and 10 where Isaiah says that God's people have not repented despite God's acts on their behalf, and as a result his hand is stretched out against them. He says that four or five times in about a chapter and a half. That tells you something about what Isaiah is trying to communicate there! Because of the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, which is that the Holy Spirit himself breathed out the Bible, we believe that every bit of repetition in the Bible is there on purpose. There are no wasted words, no wasted phrases, no wasted chapters.
9. **Consider how passages relate.** Or in other words, ask yourself, "what other passages come to mind when I read this? For instance, last week we studied Daniel 6. If you were reading that passage, you might say, "Daniel was a godly man. That reminds me of Psalm 1—the kind of person who avoids wicked people." I referred to that passage in that sermon for that very reason—Daniel beautifully illustrates the kind of person who is changed by the word of God through his meditation on it. Similarly, those who had him thrown to the lions illustrate the person who is like chaff driven away by the wind in Psalm 1:4. Maybe you read Jeremiah 2, where the Lord says that sinners have forsaken him, the fountain of living water. Then in John 4, you read Jesus tell the Samaritan woman that if she had asked he would have given her living water. And then you read in Revelation 7, that God will guide his people to living water for all eternity.
10. **Let clear passages interpret less-clear passages.** Let's be honest, there are plenty of passages in both the OT and NT that are difficult to understand or even to reconcile with others. But the truth to remember is that the Bible never contradicts itself. There may be times where you read something that sounds contradictory to another passage, but they are only seeming contradictions. Let the passages that are crystal clear—that God is both loving and holy, full of wrath

and full of mercy—help you understand why he works in a certain way in a passage.

11. **Ask good questions.** Who, what, when, where, why, how? So who is writing this passage, and to whom? Why is he writing it? When was it written? Where were they living? How should they obey this command? What were the circumstances behind this passage being written in the first place?
12. **Follow the pronouns.** In other words, ask the question of “who is saying this? Who is he talking about? What is he talking about? An example of where this is important is . . .
13. In doing this, we are trying to **identify the main message or truth of the passage.** What is the big idea behind all these smaller ideas? Don’t be discouraged if you can’t formulate a great sentence, but at least try to identify what the passage is about. Asking that question helps us not just drift our eyes over the page without really thinking carefully about it.
14. Consider **how the passage connects to the gospel.** This will happen in a variety of ways, too many to discuss here, but we want to try to do what is most natural to a particular text. We at BABC are convinced that every passage of the Bible relates to the gospel in one form or another. That’s why you can use literally any one book of the Bible to share the gospel with someone else. Every passage in some way refers to God’s saving kindness, the judgment we deserve, the right response to God or to his works, and so on. That means that in some passages, we will move toward the cross in a very different way than in another. As a recent example, last week I showed how Daniel 6 anticipates Christ through typology—the simplest way to say that is that Daniel gives you glimpses of what Christ would be like and how he would live and what would happen to him. Daniel did nothing wrong, but was sealed in a pit (alive in his case, dead in the case of Jesus) and then came out alive. But to be clear, I rarely would use typology. A more typical way of seeing a passage connect to the gospel is through a promise and seeing how Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of the promise. Or often we will see themes, like the temple, or sin, or forgiveness, or worship, and on and on. All of those relate to the gospel and to Christ himself. This suggestion could itself be its own Sunday School lesson or even Sunday School series if we wanted to really go in-depth, so the main point I want to make here is that the whole Bible anticipates and describes Christ and what it looks like to live for his glory, so seek to identify how the passage you are reading relates to the person and work of Christ in the gospel.
15. After you have done the hardest part of the work—identifying what the passage says and why it was written, we can then **identify how the passage applies to your life.** Sometimes we jump to this question too quickly, and because of that we misinterpret what it actually says. We are often inclined to see the Bible as an instruction manual to life, or as a guide to living the good life. Well, what I would say is, Daniel was not “living the good life” when he was thrown in a pit of lions. Jesus was not “living the good life” when he was hanging on a cross. Paul was not “living the good life” when he was being persecuted, lied about, shipwrecked, and endangered. So don’t ask yourself, how can this passage help my life go better? Instead, you might ask questions like “How can I love my family better because

of this passage? Whom at church do I need to pursue? Whom do I need to talk with? What do I need to confess to someone and ask for their help with? What habits have I developed that dishonor the Lord or at least make it difficult for me to love my family well? What graces (humility, brokenness over sin) does this passage call for? How can I obey this passage in my college dorm context, or in the workplace?" These are the kinds of questions we should ask once we know what a passage is saying.

Post-Bible Reading

16. You knew this next one was coming. **Read good books on the subject.** I have several different ones I could suggest to you based on your interests and how long you've read the Bible and other factors. Perhaps you have another trusted friend who would recommend a particular book. A blogger named Tim Challies is a great resource for what books to read and which ones will actually be harmful to your faith.
17. Talk with someone about what you read. Maybe it's a roommate, or your spouse, or a fellow church member. Tell them what you learned, or ask them what they think something means.
18. Consider memorizing a passage. Maybe every week you can memorize one verse. Maybe you have a lot of time on your hands and you can try memorizing a chapter every month. It's a great goal and it gives you a fruitful way to fill moments with truth where you might typically waste time.

Conclusion:

- Just over a decade ago, a British brother and sister were cleaning out their parents' home after their parents had recently passed away. I'm sure they threw away all kinds of items that were of only sentimental value at that point, but one item in particular caught their eye. It was a Chinese vase, about 16 inches tall, and they decided to have it auctioned off. A consultant at the local auction house estimated that the item would sell for up to \$1.9 million. They were surely astonished at this treasure and at the wealth that would soon be theirs to split. But when the vase went up for auction in 2010, a bidding war quickly escalated, and thirty minutes later, the vase sold for \$85 million.
- Brothers and sisters, the Bible is a priceless treasure. You don't have to dig through a musty attic to find it; you hold it in your hands. You have copies of it throughout your homes, in easy-to-read language. I urge you, read this book with joy. Study it with zeal. Listen to sermons explaining and applying it to you. Love it with all of your heart. Because the Bible reveals to you the God who created you and gave his son to rescue you from your sin so that you can be reconciled to him forever. Praise God for this glorious, priceless treasure—the story of our redeeming God!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, T. Desmond. *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008.
- Beale, G. K. *Redemptive Reversals and the Ironic Overturning of Human Wisdom*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019.
- Bock, Darrell L. *Acts, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007.
- _____. *Luke*, vol. 2. 9:51-24:53. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996.
- Boylan, Dan. "Zuckerberg Denies Consulting 'Dopamine Feedback Loop' Experts to Make Facebook Addictive." *The Washington Post*. Published April 10, 2018. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/apr/10/zuckerberg-denies-consulting-dopamine-feedback-loop/>.
- Bruce, F. F. *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979.
- Carr, Nicholas. *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010.
- Chapell, Bryan. *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005.
- Clear, James. *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*. New York: Avery, 2018.
- Crouch, Andy. *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017.
- Dempster, Stephen G. *Dominion and Dynasty: A theology of the Hebrew Bible*, NSBT 15. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003.
- DeRouchie, Jason S. *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017.
- Dreher, Rod. *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. New York: Sentinel, 2017.
- Duhigg, Charles. *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*. New York: Random House, 2012.

- Gentry, Peter J., and Stephen J. Wellum. *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018.
- Greidanus, Sidney. *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.
- Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke*. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.
- Hamilton, James M., Jr. *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010.
- _____. *What Is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible's Story, Symbolism, and Patterns*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014.
- Harmon, Matthew. *Asking the Right Questions: A Practical Guide to Understanding and Applying the Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017.
- Helm, David. *One-to-One Bible Reading: A Simple Guide for Every Christian*. Kingsford, Australia: Matthias Media, 2011.
- Hunter, Trent, and Stephen Wellum. *Christ from Beginning to End: How the Full Story of Scripture Reveals the Full Glory of Christ*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018.
- Jackson, Maggie. *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2008.
- Jacobs, Alan. *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- King, David M. *Your Old Testament Sermon Needs to Get Saved: A Handbook for Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*. Chicago: Moody, 2021.
- Lawrence, Michael. *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010.
- Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
- Liefeld, Walter L. *Interpreting the Book of Acts*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995.
- Marshall, I. Howard. *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1980.
- McCullough, Matthew. *Remember Death: The Surprising Path to Living Hope*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018.
- McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019.
- Millard, Candace. *The River of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt's Darkest Journey*. New York: Broadway, 2005.

- Mohler, R. Albert, Jr. *The Conviction to Lead: 25 Principles for Leadership that Matters*. Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2012.
- Naselli, Andrew David. *The Serpent and the Serpent Slayer*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020.
- _____. and J. D. Crowley. *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016.
- Newport, Cal. *Deep Work: Rules for Success in a Distracted World*. New York: Grand Central, 2016.
- _____. *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2019.
- Noble, Alan. *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018.
- Reinke, Tony. *12 Ways Your Phone is Changing You*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017.
- _____. *Competing Spectacles: Treasuring Christ in the Media Age*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019.
- _____. *Lit! A Christian Guide to Reading Books*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011.
- Rigney, Joe. *The Things of Earth: Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gifts*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.
- Rosner, Brian S. "Biblical Theology" in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Edited by T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000.
- Sasse, Ben. *The Vanishing American Adult: Our Coming-of-Age Crisis—and How to Rebuild a Culture of Self-Reliance*. New York: St. Martin's, 2017.
- _____. *Them: Why We Hate Each Other—And How to Heal*. New York: St. Martin's, 2018.
- Schreiner, Thomas R. *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013.
- Smith, James K.A. *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016.
- Stein, Robert H. *Luke*. New American Commentary, vol. 24. Nashville: Broadman, 1992.
- Vickers, Brian J. *The Acts of the Apostles*. ESV Expository Commentary, vol. 9. *John-Acts*. ed. Ian M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton, Jr., and Jay Sklar. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019.
- Wells, David F. *God in the Whirlwind: How the Holy-love of God Reorients Our World*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014.

ABSTRACT

TEACHING THE REDEMPTIVE STORY OF THE BIBLE TO INCREASE BIBLICAL LITERACY AT BRAINARD AVENUE BAPTIST CHURCH IN COUNTRYSIDE, ILLINOIS

Eric Timothy Brown, DMin
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Brian J. Vickers

The purpose of this project was to teach the redemptive story of the Bible to increase biblical literacy at Brainard Avenue Baptist Church in Countryside, Illinois. Chapter 1 summarizes the context of the church, states the rationale for the project, and lists the goals of the project. Chapter 2 explains the biblical basis for the project, focusing on a several significant New Testament passages. Chapter 3 describes the role of habits in developing biblical literacy. Chapter 4 outlines the project and describes how it was implemented. Chapter 5 evaluates the project as a whole and whether the project successfully met its goals.

VITA

Eric Timothy Brown

EDUCATION

BA, Bob Jones University, 2006

MA, Bob Jones University, 2008

MDiv, Bob Jones University, 2011

MINISTERIAL EMPLOYMENT

Pastor, Faith Fellowship Baptist Church, Mount Laurel, New Jersey, 2011-2014

Associate Pastor, Anniston Bible Church, Anniston, Alabama, 2014-2020

Pastor, Brainard Avenue Baptist Church, Countryside, Illinois, 2020-