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READ THROUGH THE ENTIRE WORD

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We're in our series looking at reading through the Bible in 90 days in what we're calling the B90X. We're three weeks into B90X. If you're keeping up, you'll have read 25 percent of the entire Bible -- so you should feel very accomplished in doing that in just three weeks.

In that light today, I want to share two passages I hope I can bring to life for you. The first is in Psalm 119. Psalm 119, if you just flip through it, is one long Psalm! It has 22 sections of eight verses each, one section for every letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It's written in an extremely formulaic manner or approach. Why? The Psalmist wants to communicate the fullness of his understanding. Interestingly, it parallels very closely with Deuteronomy, almost as if it's a retelling of the retelling – something we find in Deuteronomy, and you'll notice this today.

In my first congregation where I served years ago, I had the great privilege to preach in a small colonial church in New Jersey that went back before

the Revolutionary War. This particular congregation maintains records from the Revolutionary War that I could just sit down and read through -- sermons that pastors preached and session minutes that went back to the Revolutionary period! Sometimes in the summer I would hang out and pull out these records.

In one of the session records, the elders had a discussion about reading Psalm 119. It is very, very long Psalm, and there were two things (true) they wanted to do. First, they wanted to ensure when Psalm 119 was being read during the worship service, the pastor not be allowed to leave the building. They thought he would probably go to the manse, get something and would return. Secondly, they allotted more ushers when Psalm 119 was being read to ensure everyone stayed awake during the reading of Psalm 119. We're not going to read the whole Psalm because you don't look really awake -- so we're just going to read some verses , but I pray the Lord will open up his heart to you as we hear this.

Psalm 119: 89-105

*The LORD exists for ever;
your word is firmly fixed in heaven.
Your faithfulness endures to all generations;
you have established the earth, and it stands fast.
By your appointment they stand today,
for all things are your servants.
If your law had not been my delight,
I would have perished in my misery.
I will never forget your precepts,
for by them you have given me life.
I am yours; save me,
for I have sought your precepts.
The wicked lie in wait to destroy me,
but I consider your decrees.
I have seen a limit to all perfection,
but your commandment is exceedingly broad.*

*Oh, how I love your law!
It is my meditation all day long.
Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is always with me.
I have more understanding than all my teachers,
for your decrees are my meditation.
I understand more than the aged,
for I keep your precepts.
I hold back my feet from every evil way,
in order to keep your word.
I do not turn away from your ordinances,
for you have taught me.
How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!
Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.*

*Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.*

A lamp to my feet and a light to my path...Now in the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 22 beginning with verse 23, this story is set during Holy Week, the last week of Jesus' life. In this chapter, Jesus begins with a parable but then he finds himself challenged by three different groups. In this challenge, he responds to a particular theological question -- the question of paying taxes to Caesar. It's a good question. The one that we are going to consider today is a question that comes from the Sadducees.

In order to understand this passage, it's important to know who the Sadducees are. They were a small group of extremely wealthy and influential religious leaders in Jerusalem. It's believed they came from the Levitical priestly line. They held certain positions of great responsibility within the temple. They were overwhelmingly conservative. They weren't

conservative from a theological integrity, but rather conservative in their own lives. Conservative ensured an authority and increasing wealth in their own lives. The Sadducees adamantly rejected the understanding of a resurrection, putting them at odds with the Pharisees.

We must remember the Pharisees and Jesus were pretty close in many of their respective theological understandings. The reality is in scripture the Pharisees often had similar beliefs as Jesus. For example, the Pharisees believed very strongly in a resurrection. The Sadducees adamantly rejected it. The Pharisees were the larger, more populace group and the Sadducees, in essence, needed to reject it.

We understand the Sadducees believed that only the Pentateuch -- the first five books of the Bible -- were the books that should be studied and used as the basis for all of our living. All the other teachings that we have -- the Prophets, the stories that lead us into the kingdom of David -- all these would be left out. The Sadducees believed the first five books had zero reference or any inference drawn from an understanding of a resurrection. That's the light of what they are asking when they come to Jesus today.

They ask Jesus a real question. It seems to fit, but it's a real question. You see, the Pentateuch states when a man marries and dies, if the wife is still alive, the next brother in age was required to marry that woman. If they had children they were to raise them in a sense or in honor of the first husband. So they ask a question that seems a little bizarre. There are seven brothers ...the first brother dies, the next died, the next died, and they all take her as his wife as the law requires. The word of the Lord:

Matthew 22:23-33

The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, 'Teacher, Moses said, "If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother." Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman herself died. In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.'

Jesus answered them, 'You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is God not of the dead, but of the living.' And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.

Take a moment. I want you to ponder something in your heart. Think of a moment when you felt closest to God. If there are some here today not sure they even believe in God or know enough to understand what that question might mean, consider a time when you felt closest to another person. Think about that for a moment --the time you felt closest to God. I want to tell you that any question I ask you, I always ask myself ahead of time. I've been considering this very question for a few days now in preparation for today. It's one of those areas of my life where I feel overwhelmingly blessed for all the sin that continues in my life and all the areas of my life that I need growth ... God has really offered me the opportunity to have AND witness the presence of Christ, in very palpable ways.

Several years ago, after Sunday worship, Jim, Valena and I were invited to King's Daughters Hospital' neonatal intensive care unit . Here we visited a mother, the father and their baby. Their baby was ounces and ounces short of being two pounds. You could literally hold that baby in the palm of your hand. With the uncertainty of whether that child would live or die, we went to baptize the baby in the hospital. I will never forget as Jim provided that baptism with sterile water, in this sterile environment, there was the overwhelming presence of God.

There are so many moments in my life where I have encountered that – moments I would characterize as being absolutely overwhelmed to know there was something so much bigger than me in that setting, in that situation. There was something, someone present -- it was absolutely overwhelming -- to be in the closeness of God.

You know the story of the man who decided to break into a home and doesn't want to alert the neighbors so he breaks in on a dark night. He's stumbling around trying to see what he can take and all of the sudden he

hears from the corner of the room a voice that says "Jesus is watching." He freezes! He stays there frozen for a moment and then he decides to take another step to the side and hears the voice again, "Jesus is watching."

There in the darkness from the little glimmer of light from the window he sees a cage with a parrot, and the parrot is talking, "Jesus is watching." Totally disgusted he's been fooled, he approaches the parrot and decides to put the parrot out of its voice. As he does, he stumbles and quickly realizes there's a huge pit bull at the bottom of the cage. The pit bull starts to growl deeply. All of a sudden the parrot says, "Sick 'em Jesus." That's a great old joke.

Aren't there times in our life when we're absolutely overwhelmed by the presence of God? When we are absolutely overwhelmed by this incredible power and this great joy! This overwhelming sense of the presence of God moves me beyond beauty, love and affection. Sometimes it's in these places where I'm the most afraid or the most fearful – but, in both of these places, it's similar, by knowing the assurance of this absolutely overwhelming the presence of God.

J. B. Philips wrote a book years and years ago called *Your God is Too Small*. It is a short but phenomenal book. Even if you didn't read the book, the title is enough: *Your God is Too Small*. There are times in my life when my God becomes too small. What I mean is, if I live my life and if God isn't absolutely overwhelming me every day, then perhaps my God is too small. Perhaps I have accepted an understanding or a belief or a thinking about God that has answered the temptation of my life – that I must make God fit into my life rather than trying to live my life in the life of God. To put it another way -- rather than seeking to be absorbed by the greatness of God, I make God fit my life.

Here is an example when I pray, "Now Jesus, I know you and trust you and you are a mighty and incredible king. I have this issue in my life, and I want you to come in and help me deal with this issue in my life."

There's absolutely nothing wrong with praying that prayer, But, you see there is always a "but"-- if that becomes the wholeness of my prayer life, over time I start to make my God fit into the model of my life. Slowly, my God starts to become smaller and smaller so that God fixes those things

that need to be fixed or He intercedes in those relationships. All of those things are powerful and meaningful, but our God is so much bigger than that. When we stand in the presence of this God, our God is the god is that is absolutely overwhelming.

I've been doing the B90X, reading through the Bible, spending 45 minutes to an hour a day. I've read through the Bible a number of times before B90X, but this is the first time I've had to just keep reading. Sheryl, my wife, looks at me and says, "You know, you should just look a little bit happier when you are reading the Bible."

But...I got to read it.

Here's the truth, normally when I read the Bible, I read it. When I find a passage I want to wrestle with, I stop there and I wrestle with it. I ask myself, "What's going on here?" I just kind of say, "OK, Lord, speak to me and let me know what's going on."

That's noble to do that, but the reality is I simply just spend enough time to make God small enough, so I can move on. When I come to a passage that I don't understand, I spend a little bit of time looking at it or I study it a bit. I make it first my image of God, my model, and I move on.

So when these hard things, the teachings of Jesus and the hard stories and the idea that a faithful man would make a pledge that would actually cause him to have to take his daughter's life, I say, "Well, I am going to stop and make it work for me."

You see, when you read through the Bible for 45-60 minutes a day, you've got to keep up. You don't have time to stop -- you just keep reading. Part of you wants to stop and try and figure it out, but the other part is -- you're reading the Bible in a different way. You're reading it for the whole story and you're not able to stop. As a result, I've been finding it an amazing opportunity to avoid the temptation of making it fit and then missing the point. I'm just taking it as it comes.

You see, when I try to make it fit, I very often find out that, ultimately, I know it didn't work. I look at the teachings of Jesus and I look at the hard teachings in the Old Testament and I make it fit. I say, "Well, that was the

style of the times. That's just the way it was back then and it's not that way now." I rationalize it. When I rationalize it, I know underneath there's something there that I'm not taking real seriously. Over time, I start to realize I'm hiding more and more. I have parts of the Bible that I really like. I especially like when Jesus forgives me. I want to stay there, but what about the other parts? It's almost like I start hiding.

A guy calls a house and little boy answers the phone. The caller says, "Hello, who is this?"

He says, "I'm Jimmy and I'm four years old."

He says, "Jimmy is your mom there?"

Jimmy says, "Yes."

The man says, "May I talk to her?"

Jimmy says, "No, she's busy."

"Well, is your dad there?"

Jimmy says, "Yes."

"Well, may I talk to him?"

Jimmy says, "No, he's busy."

So the guy says, "Are there any other adults in the house I can talk to?"

Jimmy says, "Well, the Fire Department is here."

The man says, "Well, may I talk to someone from the Fire Department?"

"No, they're busy."

"Well, is there anybody else?"

Jimmy says, "Well, the Police Department is here."

"Then may I speak to a policeman?"

Jimmy says, "No, he's busy."

So the guy says, "Jimmy, what are they all busy doing?"

And Jimmy responds, "They're all busy trying to find me."

Here's the point. Over time, that hiding, which starts out being guilt, turns into shame; and shame is radically different from guilt. Guilt is what I am guilty of doing or what I didn't do, it's the what. But shame starts to become who I am. If I don't allow myself to be open to the fullness of God, even as we find God in His Word, then over time I start to hide and the hiding starts to make me realize I've got guilt. Ultimately, I become shameful before God and I hide myself.

It's the story of Adam and Eve after they ate the fruit. Isn't that what the Bible says over and over? Here is the key. The key is to allow God to draw us closer and closer to him. The key is to desire to be absolutely overwhelmed and to seek to settle for nothing less.

Psalm 119 says *"if your law had not been my delight I would have perished in my misery. I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life. I am yours. Save me."* This is what we're called to do. This is the privilege that we're given – simply to seek -- to be absolutely overwhelmed by the presence of God.

So, I get to this rather bizarre challenge in Matthew. Sadducees are wealthy, influential, controlling and manipulative. They only want to hold to the first five books of the Bible because these books give them the most power and authority. They come to Jesus and they say, Teacher, Rabbi, here is what the Bible says. The Bible says a guy marries, then dies. His wife marries the next brother and he dies; and she marries the next until she's married all seven of them. In the resurrection (they've already said they don't believe in the resurrection), Rabbi, which one is her husband?"

Jesus looks at them and in his eyes he says, "Stupid, stupid, stupid! YOU don't GET it do you? You don't get it. It's even in your Word and you don't get it. When you get to heaven, you're not going to marry like this. There is going to be a love in heaven that is so much deeper than any expression of love in your life that you will be absolutely overwhelmed. The person whom you adore and love, the person for whom you would

offer your life right now -- whether it be a child, a friend, a parent, a sibling or a spouse -- whoever that is, when you get to heaven, there's going to be a love that is so overwhelming that will be paled in comparison." That is an amazing thing when you think about it.

Jesus doesn't just stop there. He says, "You guys, it's been there all along. You just don't want to see it. Doesn't the Bible say in Exodus in the first five books, '*I AM the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?*'" Here's what he is saying. The Bible doesn't say "I was." You see, in Exodus, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are already dead. He doesn't say, "*I was the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob; they died and it's all over.*" He says "*I Am the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob. I am not the God of the dead; I am the God of the living.*"

Jesus tells the Sadducees, "Resurrection is there if only you have the eyes to see it. If only you knew and grasped the power and the love of God, if only you sought to be absolutely overwhelmed by the presence of God, you would get this. However, you are so rigid and caught up in your own thing and so drawn into your own way that you miss the power of resurrection itself. EVERYTHING is about resurrection. Everything is about resurrection."

Here's another great challenge in our life today. We so often want to look at the Bible and say, "Wow! That Jesus was a great teacher." Well, he was. But let me caution us here. If you're following Jesus simply because he was a great teacher, you're in overwhelming trouble because there are other great teachers out there.

I have to be honest with you. I look at the teaching of Jesus: they are powerful, meaningful and great moral teachings. I look at Buddhism and the opportunity to be enlightened in this world and that's pretty cool too—the whole reflective meditation and all that kind of stuff. If I just look at Jesus as teacher and I look at Buddhism, I think, "What does it matter which one I pick?" In the Buddhist tradition, you're enlightened -- that's it. Is that all you want in your life? Just to have your life sorted out and feeling like you are in the zone right now? Or do you want to believe that everything in this life is the reflection of the life to come and there is something eternal?

Do you want your name to go on just because you have children, or do you want to fear that it will die because you don't? Do you want to believe, trust, and hope that this is part of the promise of life eternal? This is what we have in our faith. Everything is built upon the promise of resurrection and being drawn into the mystery of God that comes with that promise.

So, let me go back to tell you a story I can't stand in the Old Testament. Here's a story that every time I read it, I dislike it. There are a lot of stories I just don't get or that confuse me, but this is one I just don't like. It's at the end of book of Deuteronomy, the last chapter, and it's short. God says to Moses at the end of Deuteronomy, "I want you to go up to a mountain."

Now remember that Moses spent 40 years with a group of people who are just a pain in the pain. They are just a pain. He spent 40 years at a time when his brother and sister actually betrayed him. He spent 40 years with a group of people who just gripe and gripe, and he keeps offering forgiveness. He goes and argues with God over and over again. He says, "You can't do this because you made this promise."

At the end of Deuteronomy, God says to him, "Okay. Moses you're going to die. I want you to go up to the top of Mt. Pisgah which looks out over the Jordan over the promised land." Moses gets himself up there, and God says, "Look at all of it." We have to believe that Moses, at one hundred and twenty years old, has some spiritual eyes in this because it implies that he even sees the sea. When you get to the top of Mt. Pisgah there's no way you can see the sea, but Moses does. It's as if God gives Moses a spiritual vision, this corrected vision, to say, "Look at all of that, all of that is what these people are going to receive as soon as you die. And by the way, you're not going to get there. You had that problem, that one thing, and I'm going to prevent you from going."

Now, this is Jim paraphrasing here, but it's almost like God is saying, "All that other stuff you did, all that faithfulness, arguing for your people and standing before me...all that doesn't matter because of that one thing; and you're not going to get there." And Moses dies! God buries him. Here's where I get even angrier about it. God buries him. All these other people, we know where most of them are buried. There's a marker here or there. The Bible says we don't even know where Moses is buried. He didn't even give him a decent funeral. Then the people spend 30 days, the ultimate

minimum, in sack cloth and ashes just waiting to get to that Promised Land and move on. That irritates me every time I read it.

But, think about it. When you get home, Google the word "transfiguration." You'll find a story of Jesus with a few disciples up on a mountain. Jesus is transfigured in the presence of two people --Elijah and Moses. You'll come to realize that Moses, through the grace and gift of Christ, is given the guarantee of the resurrection. So, when I read story in Deuteronomy -- if I only read it through my own eyes and through my own morality --it's just not right, it's not fair and I miss the whole point. Moses, who lived centuries before Christ, is guaranteed the promise of eternal life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As I look at it, I say, "Look at what all the people have and Moses, you're not going to get there, because of this one thing in your life." Moses has to feel in some way grateful, but in some way there has to be some resentment. Then I realize God is ultimately saying to Moses that the Promised Land pales in comparison to what God is offering him in the life eternal. That is our God. It is by viewing that we're called to be drawn into this mystery of the closeness of God through the power of the resurrection.

There are Mt. Pisgahs everywhere. Mt Pisgah National Forest is near here. I climbed a Mt. Pisgah in Central America years ago. It was in Guatemala in the Kashi region, in the middle of nowhere. I was based in a small Mayan village which you could sometimes get there by car. I had been invited to go up and preach in small little village they called Mt. Pisgah. The village was all Mayan, and very, very remote. You couldn't even get there by vehicle because of some crossings. We couldn't even get up there on horses, so we started to walk. We had some guides and a translator. Nobody in this village spoke Spanish let alone English. My Spanish wasn't quite good enough, so I had a Spanish translator and a Kashi translator.

We go up and it is so remote that even the guides get lost. It gets dark and we're wandering around. I have my flashlight going longer than I thought I should. I see it's already getting dim. We finally find this little village at the top of Mt.Pisgah when we hear this singing. Singing is what called us to it. I could hear it. Here was this little adobe hut which might have been ten by ten with a hundred or more people in it. We sang and I preached.

The presence of the Holy Spirit was there in a way like I never felt before in my life. It was an overwhelming experience. Then, after hours, it was all over.

We head back down. My son Ross was with me. He was between five and six years old at the time. He started walking and he wimped out within about a quarter of a mile. So all the way up the mountain, I carry him on my back and all the way down he jumps on my back. All of a sudden, sure enough, I start hearing it: BOOM! Thunder. Then you could see the flashes of lightning. "Oh Lord!" I thought.

Everybody is going. There's a sliver of a moon. Then the clouds cover that and it's pitch dark. The flashlight and flashes are gone, and we're stumbling around, losing our way. I have Ross on my back. Suddenly, the thunder and lightning cracks come. Ross is there with his legs wrap around me. Every time the lightning strikes, he would just squeeze as tightly as he could with his little legs. Sure enough, the rain comes in these huge drops, and what little bit of poncho I have, I put on him. I'm carrying him and saying, "Ross I love you, Buddy, Buddy. Buddy, I'm going to get you home."

Very quickly, I realize I feel wet because of his tears. He's scared to death, these tears are just dropping. He's shaking as I'm carrying him down this mountain and I'm saying, "Buddy I love you. Don't worry; I'm going to get you home. Don't worry." The lightning keeps coming, and I reach a point where I realize I need to put him under here (gestures holding in front with arms around). He's still this little kid, and I'm thinking "Well, I don't know if this is true. There's probably no scientific value, but if lightning hits, maybe it will hit me and he'll be okay." So I tuck him down and we start slopping through. The whole time I am saying, "Buddy, I love you." Every time the lightning cracks, he'd just hold as tightly as he could.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity to me, as we go down one ridge, we start to see the glimmerings of a village. Sure enough, we were able to get to this little place where we were staying. My son is freezing cold and shivering. I strip him down. I take blankets and everything I can get my hands on. I just hold him tightly and say, "Buddy, I love you. I told you I'd get you home. Buddy I love you." I can feel at this moment his breath on

me. I am overwhelmed by it. It's one of the moments where I felt closest in my life not only to another person but to the presence of God. I did a lot of praying on Mt. Pisgah.

Now imagine that years and years later, that boy comes to his father and says, "How dare you put me through that? You know, I'm still afraid of lightning? Every time thunder cracks I'm scared to death because of what you put me through. How dare you go up because you thought you needed to do something? People don't even remember that you were there. How dare you risk my life and how dare you do that? I'm still traumatized."

Do you know how that father would feel? That father would feel, "You've stolen one of the greatest memories of my life, one of those moments when I was closest to you in my entire life, and you didn't value it. You didn't know it. You didn't recognize it."

Then I think that in the first chapter of Deuteronomy God said, "*I carried you like a child.*" How many times in my own life have I gone to God, "How dare you do that? How dare you bring that? How dare you? I'm still traumatized by it and I'm still frightened. How dare you do that to me?" I'll never be able to hear because I'm so filled with my own self, so filled with the smallness of God. I'll never be able to hear God say to me, "That was the point when I loved you the most. That was the point when I was closest to you. That was the point when you were so drawn to me that I could feel your breath and can even now."

I don't know what mountain God has called you to climb, I don't know what your Mt. Pisgah is today, but I do know that if you are open to it, open to being absolutely overwhelmed, God will speak a word of resurrection. Here's the thing that's so amazing to me. It is not a question of life and death because the living reality is the only language that a shovel can speak, whether it be in the garden or at the graveside, is the word resurrection. You see, for us we have this assurance that in the midst of everything God is there.

I don't know, in the midst of broken dreams, if you are looking out from your mountain over brokenness or if you sense some great expectation of what will come. I do know that what you think you see is only a glimmer.

I do know that if you trust, if you believe, and if you hope you will ultimately experience the power and the promise of new life and of resurrection. Because our God is not a god of the dead. Our God is a god of the resurrection.

I pray that you'll take this Word, that you'll let this be your story, that you'll read it in such a way that you will be open to it guiding you. It troubles me. There are things I don't get. Things that still anger me, but let me tell you when I read the Bible through the eyes of resurrection, there is nothing but hope. From the beginning to the very end, that is what God says to you. "If you want to be close to me, you will be overwhelmed by hope."

I think about the world and it seems to me that this is what we do: We cheat the world by just offering the smallness of a god rather than what is truly possible. Our God can do all things. All things are possible through him even when it doesn't appear so. Our God sees not as we see. Our God lives and works not as we live and work, but our God is a god who says in all things there is nothing but hope and promise of life eternal. I pray for you today that you would look past and you would look to.

Let's pray. Father, I thank you for today. I thank you that there are so many times in my life that you carried me like child. I thank you now for the sound of children that just fill me with overwhelming joy. I pray that you would give me a hope to live into a new generation--even a new spiritual generation for my life.

I pray, Lord, that you would remind me of forgiveness in my life. I pray that you would remind me that in order for me to approach your resurrection, I have to come with repentance. I have to say, "Lord, I don't know. I don't get it. I've sinned, I've fallen away, I simply just want to come and all I'm asking right now is that you absolutely overwhelm me with the word of hope. Then, Lord, give me the privilege of making you big enough to share with this world that so desperately needs it." That's our prayer today: to be absolutely overwhelmed. In your powerful name we pray. Amen.