

The Weekly Word

Jan 3-9, 2011

Welcome to a new year. Wow, it is 2011! I marvel at how quickly time moves on. Since I have been reading the Bible for years, I have found that when I read a passage for the 2nd, 3rd, or however many times, God continues to breathe life into His word and speak to me day after day. So, I hope you will continue reading the Bible with me...

Happy New Year and may the Lord Bless you with a richer and deeper faith this year than you have experienced in the past!

Grace and Peace, Bill

To hear the Bible read click this link... <http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/audio/>.

Monday, January 3: Acts 5- Dedication to their call...

So much happening in this one chapter, that I have enough ponder points for a full week. After thoughtfully reading the full chapter, I sat and pondered. Where is God speaking to me today? This word and that sentence surfaced, but nothing stuck. After more thought, I began to ponder the whole rather than smaller bits and pieces.

God's inner voice began to speak. I found myself astonished at the dedication of the apostles. Here are some of the observations I began to make.

They had a willingness to confront wrong within their "family", the church. There are not many followers of Jesus, yet. Yes, 3,000 came to faith on Pentecost and others along the way. But that's it. That's everyone who believes in Jesus. They are a small dot on the landscape of Jerusalem. Then one day, a couple pull a rouse. Informed by the Holy Spirit, Peter confronts Ananias and later Sapphira, publically. Maybe I am alone in this but I don't like to confront people, people I love and worship with, when a wrong surfaces. Peter, however, willingly and for the sake of the entire body, confronts their lying. Dedication to the call...

Peter and the apostles continue to go about their business of witnessing to Jesus and one day they are arrested. Thrown in jail, they are miraculously released at night. They were also told not to flee for safety or to go home and get rest, since it had been a long day. No, the angel tells them, "Go, stand in the temple courts and tell the people the full message of this new life" (20). They are told to get back out there and preach some more. It doesn't take super intelligence to guess what will happen when those who arrested them, the first time, find out they escaped and are preaching/healing again! Dedication to the call...

Arrested again and ordered to stop, Peter defies the leaders, "We must obey God rather than men" (29). Dedication to the call...

They would have been executed were it not for the voice of a wise leader, Gamaliel (who by the way was Paul's rabbi –might Paul have been present learning from his rabbi??). Instead they were flogged then released. Upon their release the text comments: *The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ* (41-42). Dedication to the call...

I am awe struck by their dedication to Jesus and His call. Their dedication challenges me and asks of me, "Am I willing to be that dedicated to Jesus and His call? Am I?"

Lord, that question is not easy to answer. My puffed up ego would like to answer 'Yes, of course.' But as I examine my life, I cannot find evidence that would support that answer. Lord, all I can do is fall before Your mercy

and call out for courage and the power of the Holy Spirit to transform this life of mine. Oh, Jesus, help me in my unbelief and in my inadequate dedication. Amen.

History nugget, a flogging: leather thongs made into whips were beaten against the bare, upper body of the bound prisoner. The prisoner would be made to kneel, then the triple-strap whip would be beaten across both chest and back, with two beatings on the back for every one on the chest.

Tuesday, January 4: Acts 6- caring for those in need...

Two thoughts grabbed my attention. First, was the word ‘daily’, as in daily distribution of food. The church in Jerusalem placed a high priority on caring for those in the community who were in need. Widows had few resources and if a widow didn’t have family to care for her, there were no food stamps or government services, like Social Security to step in and help out. The people of the church accepted this responsibility. Every day the church made sure food got to widows in need. Every Day! Without this food the widows and any children she had went without food that day. And these widows would need this food every day until they remarried or if they had children. When the children grew, they could support mom. Care for widows was a significant undertaking.

I never considered the enormity and longevity of this need. All too often I consider the needs of the poor as a ‘when I think about it’ issue. These first Christians understood the on-going nature of need for those who are poor. Day in and day out they cared. The church rose to the need in Jesus’ name.

Now this ministry was not without its issues. What impresses me is that the leadership recognizes the need and deals with it and moves on. Stuff happens, sin and favoritism sneaks in. Okay, make corrections and move on.

People in the church step up and accept responsibility to be solvers. It comes down to people playing their part. People daily giving the food for the widows to eat and some people managing the task of the distribution of the food. Everyone plays a role in giving and supporting those in need. Some accept the added responsibility of organizing and doing the actual distribution.

My meditation lingers on the people daily caring for those in need within the community. There seems to be a different quality of caring for those in need in the text than I see and take part in today. I have to think on this some more. Are they more connected with one another? Do they have bigger hearts? What is the difference? I’m not sure it is a simple answer...

Lord Jesus, what is it You have me to learn today? Lord Jesus, where am I to grow today?. What changes should I make today? Help me, Lord, help me. Amen.

My second observation was the apostles understanding. Their particular call to witness –preach, teach, lead etc.- helped the community find a solution to the problem of inadequate distribution of food, but the apostles didn’t accept that role themselves. They knew what they were to do and stayed within the new job description they were given by Jesus back in Acts 1.

Interesting... this puts great ownership on the body to work out a solution.

Wednesday, January 5: Acts 7- Knowing God’s story...

As I read Stephen’s defense to the Sanhedrin, I kept thinking about how well he knew scripture history. Stephen recounts for his hearers, God’s story of redemption beginning with Abraham and continuing through the prophets all the way to Jesus.

Listening to his keen understanding of God's workings and man's rebellion, I understand why the church called Stephen "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (6:5) and "a man full of God's grace and power" (6:8). Stephen saturated his life with the word of God!

How well do I (do you) know God's story? Can I (you) speak it with clarity and poignancy?

Lord, help me to hide Your word in my heart. Give me diligence to read and study Your word. Send the Holy Spirit to be my teacher, not only so I know the facts but so that I can apply Your word to the many and various situations of my life.

Lord, may Your word be a lamp for my feet and a light for my path (Ps 119:105). Like David, may I desire Your word more than gold, may it be sweeter to me than honey from the honeycomb (Ps 19:10 adapted). In Jesus' name I make my plea. Amen.

Thursday, January 6: Acts 8- Everyone...

This is one of the few chapters in Acts where Peter and Paul are not the main character. Instead Philip, one of the seven, commands center stage and God uses him in extraordinary ways.

Despite this observation, the everyday believer garnered my devotional attention. The chapter continues the account, which began with Stephen's martyrdom in chapter 7 and Luke explains, *On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ... Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went (1-4).*

This persecution affected everyone in the church in dramatic ways. First people were scattered. Linger for a moment. Long time residents of Jerusalem flee from their homes and possibly their inheritance. Visitors who were saved while being in Jerusalem have to cut short their visit and flee, hopefully home. The disruption for people—everyday people like you and me—was great, not to mention carrying the possibility of death! The ugliness continues as Saul leads raiding parties that break into homes, drag out believers and imprison them. This is the kind of story that surfaces in despotic regimes that dotted the 20th century.

What simply blew my mind, however, was not the cruelty of Saul and men like him, but the faith of these scattered men and women who *preached the word wherever they went*. These regular men and women of the church, fleeing for their lives, continued to talk up Jesus. Luke is not talking about the big name apostles or even the Seven. He is writing about moms and dads, teens and slaves, who were saved by the blood of Jesus, and were now spreading Jesus' name through out the world as they scattered to safety.

What got to me is that even though the apostles and other leaders get most of the print in Acts, the church grew because of the 'everyones' of the church.

And the same is true today. Christian celebrities have a place in the church, but real growth of the kingdom occurs because men and women share the name of Jesus during everyday life!

Lord, I want to be a faithful 'everyone' sharing Jesus as I live life. Help me to listen well to the promptings of Your Holy Spirit, so that in tune with You I speak for You that others might believe in You, Jesus. In Your name. Amen.

Friday, January 7: Acts 9- A changed life

Believing in Jesus, being saved, confessing Jesus... however you say it, conversion should result in a changed life. The change might be dramatic like Paul or it might build over time but,

no matter how we slice it, a person should live differently after becoming a follower of Jesus and being filled with the Spirit.

Paul's conversion is a dramatic example of change. Paul went from persecutor to preacher within a few days. His change was so dramatic that a price was put on his head. If he had not been snuck out of Damascus, he would have been killed by the people he worked for before his conversion.

Join me in taking a few minutes to review your life. How have you changed as a result of following Jesus? Conversion will bear fruit resulting in changed lives, lives resembling Jesus more and more with each passing year. How have you changed and how are you changing these days? ... Think about that.

Lord, I see some areas where I have changed and I bless and thank You for the unction to make these changes. Lord, I also see some areas with which I still struggle. Send Your Holy Spirit to be my teacher, that I might learn from You and change accordingly. Through the name of my atoning Savior, Jesus, I pray. Amen.

Saturday, January 8: Acts 10- Even on Gentiles

It is hard to grasp in the 21st century the radical nature of the events we have just read... a devout Jew entering the home of a Gentile. Other devout Jews (Peter's companions) watching as God crosses the largest religious gulf one can imagine in order to bring the good news of Jesus. We read this account as if one neighbor crossed the street to another but it is so much more. I am struggling to construct a modern equivalent.

As my heart listens to this story, the Spirit is saying to me there is no human division which Jesus does not seek for His followers to cross for the gospel's sake.

Crossing barriers requires sincerity. Peter's heart needed to be changed first before he could venture into the home of a Gentile with sincerity. God did this through miraculous intervention but Peter brought friends along. Think about it. These men did not have the benefit of a divine-vision, they only had the testimony of a trusted Christ-follower leader.

I, you as a reader of this devotional and Christ-followers today, fit better into that second category. Few of us will have visions from the Lord that change our hearts and direct us to cross some specific human-constructed barrier with the gospel. But all of us have the example of Peter and the testimony of believers throughout the ages, who have sought with humble hearts to take the gospel to the world, including people with whom they were at one time enemies...

Think about it, I will...

Lord, my heart needs so much more work. It is still corrupted by prejudice and fear of people I do not know and these, I realize, are barriers for me to speak about Jesus with others. Work on my heart, change it. Change me, that I may have courage and obedience, like Peter, to go and speak about Jesus with all You bring in my path. In Jesus name and for the sake of the advancement of the gospel, I pray. Amen.

Sunday, January 9, Sunday Worship

If any of my thoughts or the Bible readings spark questions send an email reply and I will do my best to answer all questions from people on the list... I will answer personal questions privately; general questions will be answered in a subsequent email installment.

If you are reading along with me from the PCOG website you can send questions or request being placed on the weekly email list by emailing Lisa at office@pcogonline.org.

Click here for a link to my sermons on the web. Sermons are generally posted within 2 days.