

Reinforcements *from Sunday's message*

*"Reflect on what I am saying,
for the Lord will give you insight into all of this." 2 Tim 2.7*

Encountering God Through His Word (May 3, 2009)

We all know it's important to read the Bible. It helps shape our hearts, our minds, and our desires. But how do we do it? How do we get past the part where it's a chore that we do because we have to, and leap into being passionate about reading it? How often have you read a Bible verse, and thought you've heard it, understood what it said? God gave us His word so that we could live IN it. What He's given us has depth that cannot be fully appreciated or understood in one sitting. We've read that His Word is our spiritual food, yet often times we read it, put it down, thinking we're done. So what's the best way to squeeze every ounce of meaning out of it? We need to read it and ruminate on it – reflect on it, think about it, try to see how it applies to our life. Try this: Read a verse, or passage, asking God to give you insight into it (Reading it in several versions can be helpful, too). Ruminates on its meaning in your life. Memorize a portion or a whole verse to keep it close, and get even more depth out of it. We are told to "Reflect on what I am saying, for the LORD will give you insight into all this." (2 Timothy 2:7). Who doesn't want insight? We are instructed to meditate on it day and night (Psalms 1:2). We are told that God's Word is perfect, it revives our soul, gives light to our eyes, and is more precious than gold. (Psalms 19:7, 8, 10). What are we waiting for?

Easter Celebration – It's Kingdom Time (April 12, 2009)

Read and Reflect on Ephesians 1.19-23

The empty tomb means the world to Christ-followers – it signifies the pivotal point in history that set in motion the new realities of the kingdom of God. Jesus' followers during the time of his ministry went from feeling frightened to the certainty that Jesus was, in fact, alive. Jesus' authority to break the grip of death and evil was solidified with his death and resurrection – a new power was now at hand. And, the definition of kingdom "territory" was expanded to include "...to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1.8) There were no limits to what God could and would do. This time in which we now live, between the empty tomb and Jesus' second coming, is kingdom time, and we are witnesses to the signs of the new kingdom and God's power to transform our lives. When you feel overwhelmed and desperate, yet sense a voice saying, "You're not alone" or "You are my son/daughter." Or when you choose to do wrong and yet sense God's voice saying, "I forgive you." Or when you don't meet someone's need, but then turn and offer help – these are all signs of the new kingdom breaking in to the world. We are to be witnesses to God's transforming power. Ask God today for a sensitivity to His Spirit to see and hear His power to change your heart and the world.

The Shape of Our Devotion – God’s Bigger Agenda (April 5, 2009)

Read and Reflect on Matthew 21.1-11

As Jesus made his “triumphal” entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, the people were elated because they saw their King, who they expected was going to free them from the sociopolitical oppression of foreign governments (Zech 9.9-10). They laid out their cloaks and palm branches as an expression of sacrifice to honor the King. They recognized Jesus as sovereign, but they expected him to be a warrior king to come and fulfill their needs and their agenda in their time. What they did not expect was for him to come as Suffering Servant, the One who would suffer and die to break the spiritual oppression of evil over them. They turned their backs on him because they were holding on to their own expectations rather than following him and waiting to see how an offer of real life was to be given. This real life in Jesus is peace, the presence of welfare, and Jesus wants us to follow him so closely that we let go of our own expectations to take hold of his bigger agenda. Are you willing to take your heart (your cloak) and your will (your palm branches) and lay them in sacrifice at the King’s feet? Are you willing to wait for His desires, passions and expectations to be lived in you despite the circumstances of your life? Take this week of Holy Week to reflect on how your life can be a sacrifice to honor and serve the King.

Celebration Sunday – The Way Ahead (March 8, 2009)

Read and reflect on Joshua 5.9-6.2

“Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you,” (v.9) speaks to the deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian oppression and to the establishment of God’s people in the promised land. The road that paved the way for the Israelites to be where they are in this passage, which was full of shame, dependency, self-centeredness and despair, served to accentuate the necessity and the immense power by which God delivered them. God had a fulfillment plan in place for the Israelites, and He has one for each of us. God wants to liberate us from fear, anxiety and crippling mistakes of the past and, through His gospel of grace, reinstate a calling He has on each one of our lives. By using the “weapons” of love, joy, faith and prayer on our part, this calling will take shape into the plan God has had all along. In a private moment today, ask God to provide a godly confidence for the responsibilities he has called you to and to instill in you a humble submission to His plan and a hope for its fulfillment.

The Shape of Our Devotion: Replicate (February 22, 2009)

Reflect on Jesus' relationships mentioned in Acts 6.12-19

The 3 main relationships of Jesus mentioned in our passage, namely, his Father, the disciples and other people in the world, likewise form an equilateral triangle that models for us equilibrium in our faith. We are to be concerned with **communing with our Father** (UP on the triangle) – this is the power that fills us and sends us forth with love, grace and truth. By way of this mysterious power, we are then to **form partnerships within the community of believers** to mutually encourage and help one another grow in faith in Christ (IN on the triangle). We are also to move out, **integrating our lives with the lives people in our world** who do not yet know Jesus (OUT on the triangle). Taking out just one of these components on the triangle renders our spiritual lives incomplete and can cripple the power that is at work in us. The UP, IN and OUT components illustrated by this triangle bring abundant life by aligning our lives with the Spirit of Jesus. The Creek can provide avenues to help you grow in any of these areas, but it's up to you to initiate movement toward equilibrium. Ask God for open eyes and an open heart to help you move toward a fuller expression of your faith.

Heaven Touching Earth: Incarnational Church (February 15, 2009)

Read Acts 28.17-32

Jesus promises in Acts 1.8 that we will be His witnesses “to the ends of the earth.” God’s desire is for all people to explore and discover the reality of the strength, hope and forgiveness which is found in Him (1 Tim 2.4). God sent Jesus to us to give us this message, and Jesus sends *us* to give this message to the people in our world today (John 20.29, John 17.18). God’s Spirit lives in us (yes, *in us!*) to empower us to carry this out, and this is the crux of living incarnational lives. An incarnational presence involves **being attractive** in that we are doing good deeds (Matt 5.16), speaking up for the marginalized or speaking a word of gentleness into a heated situation, for example. These deeds will tantalize outsiders and possibly cause them to consider what the source of our goodness is. Living incarnation involves being **prayerful**: “I urge, then, first of all, that...prayers be made for everyone.” (1 Tim 2.1) Living incarnation involves **being engaging** – not waiting for people to come to us (i.e., church) but infiltrating our society and **being bold** with the message of hope and forgiveness (Colossians 4.5-6, 1 Peter 3.15). Reflect on these four elements of an incarnational presence. Ask God to encourage you to continue in the area you are strong and empower you to step up in the area you are not.

Heaven Touching Earth: Lead by Example (February 8, 2009)

Read Acts 20.17-38

Paul describes what it means to live a life following Christ. And Paul should know; he founded the church at Ephesus, which was the leading church in this area for 400 years. The example set by Paul included integrity of lifestyle, humility to serve, perseverance, speaking truth and a single-mindedness of purpose. He instructed people to “*follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*” (1 Corinthians 11.1) This is a bold command, yet Paul’s life yielded the fruit of following Christ’s example: **self-leadership** (keep watch over yourself and put necessary change into affect in your own life), **shepherding others** (nurture others in their spiritual growth, care for, encourage, and protect each other spiritually and lead others to grace and truth) and **commitment to the word of grace** (Scripture shapes us in ways beyond our understanding). Meditate on these three areas of leading by example. Which one are you strong in? Which one could use more attention? Imagine if each one of us was coached and mentored...and if each one of us coached and mentored others in following Christ? The Bay Area is in desperate need for people who yield the fruit of following Christ’s example. We are here for a purpose. Be the example.

Heaven Touching Earth: Turning Point (February 1, 2009)

Read Acts 19:8-20

Ephesus in the 1st Century was considered the center of a twisted spirituality: many of the people were obsessed with superstition and demonic powers and were far from God. When Paul brought the message of Jesus Christ to them, there was a variety of responses – hardened hearts (those who deflected the message of Jesus), opportunistic hearts (those who wanted all the benefits of God’s power, but didn’t want to submit to His authority) and convicted hearts (those who respected God’s authority and revered His name). This latter bunch was convicted of God’s rightful place in their life, they confessed that their old practices had no power compared to the life-giving power of God, and they eventually became the leading church in this area. Those convinced of God’s power turned away from their old practices (repentance) and turned towards God’s incredible power to cleanse, forgive and restore. **What old practices are you holding onto?** Identify them, confess them to God and turn from them toward the life-giving power of God. The Bible is clear that when we regularly practice repentance, i.e., when we find ourselves in a place not pleasing to God, and we confess and turn from that place, that we too will experience God’s immediate cleansing, forgiveness and restoration.

Heaven Touching Earth: Something New, Something Fresh (January 18, 2009)

Read Acts 15:36-16:40

Often, in the midst of rough times, we want to throw up our hands in frustration, or maybe even shake an angry fist at God, *Where are you in this?* In the middle of difficult times, it comes so naturally to complain, whine, scream, and question others and God about what is happening. Is it possible though, that we can respond to something other than our present circumstances? What looks like human error, God can use for His bigger agenda. When our Plan A fails, and even our Plan B, God can use His own plan for His purposes. This gives me hope. Isn't it wonderful to think that He can bring something new, something different, and something purposeful out of a difficult time? Paul and Barnabas ran into some of their own difficulty. Were they going against God's will? No- in fact, they were following it. They still encountered obstacles. God used those obstacles so the gospel would be presented to a wider audience. If only we could see that He is working behind the scenes so it all comes out to benefit His kingdom. Like a tapestry, our lives often look a mess from behind, full of loose ends, knots, and randomness. When a tapestry is turned over, however, the beauty, design, and overall pattern can be seen. I guess this is what it means to live by faith, and not by sight. In what area of your life might God be working behind the scenes to bring about greater purpose?

Something Bigger: Giving (January 11, 2009)

Read Matthew 25.14-30

God's restoration agenda is what Jesus spoke of more than 100 times in the gospels regarding the kingdom of God. God is at work restoring hearts, relationships, justice and truth back to His intended plan. God invites us to join Him in this work and will resource us accordingly. **Everyone receives God-given resources:** recognizing that everything we have comes from God (1 Chronicles 29.14) and that He gives us the ability to produce wealth (Deuteronomy 8.17-18) will help us give as He stirs our hearts to give. **Everyone is entrusted with resources to further God's purpose:** if we are being faithful to immediately put our resources (money, gifts, talent, time, energy) to work by investing it in God's restoration agenda, then we can expect it to yield fruit (Ephesians 2.10). **Everyone who is unprepared to use resources as God intends, abandons their God-given responsibility** (ouch!): being fearful or playing it safe by not investing and "hid[ing] your talent in the ground," (Matthew 25.24) will accomplish exactly what you set out to do – nothing. Think and pray about how you can prioritize the abundance of resources God has given you to further His kingdom work.

Change Possible?
(January 4, 2009)

Reflect on Proverbs 4.23:

“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”

Jesus warned his listeners to *“obey [the Pharisees and the teachers of the law] and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.”* (Matt 23.3) In other words, their actions belied the truths they were teaching. They were so focused on external, obligatory, religious customs that they ignored what really matters most to God: the internal condition of the heart. The author of Romans tells us *“For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.”* (7.8) This truth points us to the reality of Jesus, by Whom is the only way we can possibly live out our new identity. The very Spirit of Jesus lives in His followers (Colossians 1.27) – not just symbolically, but as a real presence that can change us from the inside out. God doesn’t come uninvited, however. We need to invite Him into our lives, moment-by-moment, day-by-day to do an interior work in us. Meaningful, consistent habits, such as prayer, solitude, reflection and application of Scripture, service and connecting in a Christian community re-orient our hearts to God to help us live out our new identity in Him. How can you begin to consistently invite God into your day to rework your heart?
