

YEAR IN REVIEW - 2008

SCRIPTURE TEXT: PSALM 119:1-8 (ESV)



Rev. Russ Ramsey
December 28, 2008

Oak Hills
Presbyterian
Church, Overland
Park, Kansas

WHY REVIEW?

As one charged with preaching the full counsel to God's Word to this body, I have spent a fair amount of time thinking about, praying over and mapping out next year's sermons. I usually sketch out a year at a time because I want to see where we're headed. My prayer is that our interaction with God's Word each week would amount to more than a bunch of unrelated half-hour messages, but rather would have a **cumulative** effect on us as a congregation. But before we enter into a new year of messages, I want to take time here on this last Sunday of the year to review where He has taken us in 2008.

Let me highlight just a few reasons for review as we begin. **FIRST, SCRIPTURE IS CUMULATIVE.** The Bible is not a bunch of disconnected ideas, but is one story detailing the nature of God's relationship to man and the reconciliation to Him we find in Christ alone. Our study of the parts of Scripture should include asking, "How does this text relate to rest of God's Word?"

SECOND, THE HEARING AND STUDY OF SCRIPTURE WAS ALWAYS MEANT TO BE A CORPORATE ENDEAVOR. Nearly every letter or book in the Bible was written with the intent that it would be read, studied and applied by the people of God **corporately** (Most of Paul's epistles were to churches, the books of Moses were delivered to the people of Israel, the Psalms were the hymnbook of the Israelites, the prophets were addressing nations...)

THIRD, STEPPING BACK TO SEE THE CUMULATIVE NATURE OF GOD'S WORD ENCOURAGES THE CHURCH. If we look at the preaching of the word as a journey this congregation walks together, spending time in review will reveal that, in fact, we have covered some ground. We are not standing in the same place we were a year ago, and the fuel that has moved us forward has been the content of the word of God, and it is very encouraging to see God working in our midst in this way.

FOURTH, THE CUMULATIVE MESSAGE OF GOD'S WORD MEANS TO CHANGE US. Scripture tells a cumulative story that is more than informational, it is **transformational**. God is raising this church up in this time for a reason—to bear witness to His Son Jesus Christ, to make disciples of all the nations—and the time we invest in the study of His word together reveals not only what happened long ago, but also who we are to be now as a result.

I can think of no better place from which to draw a text for a message like this than Psalm 119. This is the longest chapter of Scripture, coming in at a whopping 176 verses. It is an acrostic poem comprised of 22 stanzas, each correlating with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. To look at it in the original Hebrew, you'll see each line of each stanza begins with that stanza's corresponding letter. It is a beautiful work of art—a marvel of ancient poetry—and we're going to begin the honor of working our way through it, one stanza per year. The staff here jokes that I'm more of a marathon guy than a sprinter. I'm wired to not mind things taking time. So the prospect of taking 22 years to unpack one chapter of Scripture sounds like fun to me.

But there's something about approaching this Psalm in this way which just seems to fit. The Psalm has a theme. It is a celebration of the reality that God has given His Law to His people and has not withheld it. It honors the fact that God tells us what He wants from us, rather than leaving us guessing. And it delights in how perfect His guidance is.

OPEN MY EYES—PSALM 119:1-8

- ¹*Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the Lord!*
- ²*Blessed are those who keep His testimonies,
who seek Him with their whole heart,*
- ³*who also do no wrong,
but walk in His ways!*
- ⁴*You have commanded Your precepts
to be kept diligently.*
- ⁵*Oh that my ways may be steadfast
in keeping Your statutes!*
- ⁶*Then I shall not be put to shame,
having my eyes fixed on all Your commandments.*
- ⁷*I will praise You with an upright heart,
when I learn Your upright rules.*
- ⁸*I will keep Your statutes;
do not utterly forsake me!*

This Psalm is a bit curious in that it **extols** the virtues of God's Law—calling it His ways, testimonies, rules, statutes, precepts and commandments in just these few verses alone. But it does it with more creative and poetic detail than you'll find anywhere else. The plea of the Psalm is worthy of such beauty. The Psalmist essentially pleads, "Lord, show me your ways that I may walk in them and then grant me a steadfast heart that I wouldn't stray, because the best life is the one lived in union with You. It is how we were meant to live, so grant me the grace to live this way."

The ESV study Bible offers this note: "This Psalm reflects the view that the Lord, Who abounds in steadfast love and faithfulness and Who therefore freely and fully forgives His people when they confess their sins, loves His people without limit, and therefore also guides the faithful in the way of life that is genuinely good and beautiful." Our objective for the rest of this message is to return to those places in His word where we've already been this year in order to remember or perhaps even mine God's precepts, rules, statutes and guidance so His word might reside in our hearts and guide us in the life that is genuinely good and beautiful.

ACTS AND EVANGELISM

We began the year in Acts, studying Paul's 2nd missionary journey, which was much more challenging than the first. As he made his way across Asia Minor, people were beginning to see his words were not those of a fly-by-night charlatan embracing the latest trend. He was "explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.'" (Acts 17:3) Christianity hinges on the doctrine of the life, death and resurrection of Christ as the Savior and substitute for sinners. There is substance to the Gospel—and it is offensive to man because it presumes to tell us we need a Savior who will do for us what we can't do for ourselves—set us right with our Maker.

We spent three weeks exploring Paul's motive, content and outcomes of evangelism, and how that relates. Our **MOTIVE** for evangelism must be that we love God with all we have and are—and we **want** God to be known and adored by as many as we can proclaim Him to. The **CONTENT** of evangelism is to proclaim a knowable God to those who don't know Him, bringing specificity to the undefined. That's what our witness **always** is—getting specific. With the **OUTCOMES** of evangelism, we saw the sovereignty of God liberates us to obey His call to testify with the assurance that His perfect will is accomplished 100% of the time, and He is pleased to use us in the process.

When Paul went from Athens to Corinth, he said, *"I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling..."* (1 Cor 2:2-3) This is the core of Paul's gospel—the one for which he suffered so much—Christ and Him crucified. There is no other message—just this. Throughout Paul's journeys, he clung resolutely to doctrine, and I wondered if this might not be a year where we saw this theme come up again and again.

THE RISEN CHRIST

From that study of Paul's "boots on the ground" evangelism, we shifted to three studies on the Resurrection. We talked about the story, the evidence and the importance of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection of Jesus is not merely one of the many facets of Christianity. It is the event upon which everything rests. If He wasn't raised, Paul was right to say *"your faith is futile and you are still in your sins... If in this life we have only hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."* (1 Cor 15:17,19)

Jesus' resurrection authenticates the Apostle's message, it reveals God's intent to save and proves He is worthy of our trust. His resurrection accomplished our forgiveness and assures us of life after death while giving this life meaning. Salvation is God's work. So far the theme of the year has been pretty focused on God's intent to save His people through the life, death and resurrection of His son, and the transformational impact that message has had on countless millions.

I HAVE LOVED YOU

From that Easter series, we went back to the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi and spent ten weeks there. We called that series, **"The Burden of God's Love,"** because the first verse of Malachi calls what follows an "oracle," or "a thing lifted up," or **burden**. The next verse reveals this burden—God says to His people, *"I have loved you,"* but they say, *"How have you loved us?"* God's burden in Malachi is conveying to a people who doubt Him that He does, in fact, love them. We read of a people who believed they'd been poorly loved by the One who swore to never forsake them. They were disillusioned with God.

The people demanded God give an account of His infidelity to them. But as the book grows clearer, we saw God hadn't broken faith with His people; they broke faith with Him. God has revealed one example after another—their worship was half-hearted, their business practices dishonest, their marriages faithless and their trust in Him to meet their needs, broken. It wasn't that God showed faithfulness one day and withheld it the next. We're the unfaithful ones. He is faithful throughout.

When the people demand proof of God's love, He doesn't say, *"Remember all the great times we've had?"* Instead, He says, *"I chose you, and when Edom sought to take advantage of your exile by usurping your vacated land, I knocked down everything they built. And I'll keep doing it. I have bared my mighty arm against them. And the world will revere the fact that you are mine."*

Since Malachi hit so heavily on God's choosing and keeping His people for Himself, we returned to that doctrine for a couple weeks in the summer. We saw that God doesn't rely on the spiritual insights of the spiritually dead to guide His mercy and grace. (Eph 1:3-10) If you know Him or are hearing His call even now, it is because before the world was made and before you ever had a chance to do the worst thing you've ever done or the best, the Maker of the Universe, according to His sovereign will and good pleasure, elected you to salvation, which required nothing less than the death of His Son Jesus in your place.

Again, we found ourselves focused on the theme of God's plan to save His people by His grace, through His Son. In Christ, *"we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ"* (Eph 1:7-9)

NO ONE TOOK HIS LIFE

Now for the last three months, we have been tracing our way through the final days of Jesus' earthly ministry, unpacking His statement that *"No one takes my life from me. But I lay it down of my own accord, for I alone have the authority to lay it down and the authority to take it up again."* (Jn 10:18) Again, the theme of the series, and thus the theme of the year has been the centrality of Christ and Him crucified. Christianity is more than an inspirational belief system. In fact, the story of Jesus Christ, our Incarnate Lord, is a graphically bloody story of treachery, injustice, torture and death—a death that gives way to the most glorious hope of eternal life the world has ever known.

We've looked with a microscope at the days leading up to that event, testing Jesus' words to see if at any point along the way He became a victim or a martyr or a man caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. What we've seen is that He never lost His composure and was never caught off guard. Instead, He's been methodically preparing His captors to arrest Him and His disciples to know what to do when that occurs. Through the lens of Christmas we saw it was for this reason that He was born in the first place—to take the sins of those who would believe in Him upon Himself and die in their place. No one took His life from Him, but He did lay it down. And it was real.

2008 – THE YEAR IN REVIEW

So where does this leave us? The Psalmist prayed, *"Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping Your statutes!"* Here is my summary of what I pray we have gleaned from God's word this year, in order that we might be steadfast in keeping His statutes.

Another year of our lives has passed. We spend them in all sorts of ways hoping we're building toward something—a retirement, a family, a better job, a better life. And yet, we find from God's word this year a reminder that this life is a vapor, hurtling us all toward what follows. From Malachi to Jesus last days before the cross to the Apostle Paul's missionary journeys, they all come back to our most essential need—the need for salvation. And they also point to that salvation provided in the One God has given to live and die in our place, Jesus Christ.

My prayer for this coming year is that we'd see the wisdom of Paul's resolution to know nothing but Christ and Him crucified as we remember where God's Word has taken us in 2008—that we'd be captured anew by our need for Him, that we'd be strengthened by the reality of that sacrifice as we've seen the events leading up to it unfolding, and that we'd take Christ's call to bear witness to Him more earnestly than ever in response to the mercy and salvation He has lavished upon His people.