

ACTS: THE HIGHLIGHTS – Part 2

My plan for today is to finish out this two-week section on "highlights" from Acts: looking at some noted verses from the whole of the book. Next Sunday we're at the park and two Sundays, Lord willing, we'll be back here beginning a series on marriage.

Now last week I finished by having us look, briefly, at Acts 4:12. But let's begin by going to that same verse once more...

Acts 4:12

It was just last Sunday, while driving to church, that I heard, of all things, these two men talking about being "born again Christians." I had thought I had the radio tuned in to WITF (National Public Radio) and that somehow it must have gotten switched over to another channel. But, no, it was indeed NPR. So these two men went on. As I listened it became clear that the one man was telling how he had come to be a born-again Christian earlier in life but that now he completely rejects it, while the 2nd man still holds on to his Christian faith. Both men showed a clear understanding of what they were talking about, even referencing such things as "witnessing" to people. Then, just before arriving at the church building, and just before the end of the interview, the former Christian said to the second man, "Now, I don't want to put words in your mouth but, as a Christian, do you actually believe that Jesus is the only way to God and that people who haven't trusted in Jesus are going to hell?" And the current Christian said, "No...I couldn't believe that...that would seem quite unreasonable..." and with that I don't know anything more that was said because I was **YELLING SO LOUD IN THE CAR I COULDN'T HEAR WHAT WAS BEING SAID.**

"YOU SELL OUT...you traitor..." OH, I was getting upset.

I shut up at the end just enough to hear that the guy that was SUPPOSEDLY still a Christian is a Presbyterian professor at some school.

Folks...brothers and sisters...either what we have here is true, or it is a lie. If it is a lie, then we should not be wasting our time here supposedly studying it.

So if Acts 4:12 teaches us that there is salvation ONLY in Jesus, and that it is only through him "by his name" that we can be saved, then that means that people WITHOUT Jesus are in GREAT PERIL.

If the guy on the radio had said, "Who goes to hell, I'll leave up to God. But I will say that we believe that everyone needs to come to faith in Jesus" I would have been fine with that. But to say that he didn't believe people without Jesus were really in any serious danger is a denial of scripture.

Jesus said that those who reject the Son (meaning himself) will be rejected by the Father in heaven. There is NO WAY that can be construed in any other way than to say that such people are in REAL DANGER...SERIOUS DANGER...DANGER OF HELL FIRE, to be more explicit.

So, like I said last week, I think Acts 4:12 is one of those verses you should have underlined and maybe even memorized.

Acts 12:20-23

When we were going through Acts 12 I covered these verses at some length. I don't want to go into the same detail again. But when I think of the book of Acts these verses, and verse 23 in particular, come to mind.

I must have become more aware of this passage back when I used an NIV Bible because in my mind I always think of the words,
 "because he did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down and he was eaten by worms and died."

Struck down and eaten by worms. Yes, that's the kind of verse that younger kids can come to REALLY LIKE that is in the Bible.

Kids, do you want to be STRUCK DOWN AND EATEN BY WORMS? Then be sure to give God the praise for everything you do.

Someone says, "Oh, thanks, Pastor Doug, and now my little boy is going to be having nightmares!"

Not if he gives God the praise!

For kids...for adults...for all of us, we need to speak up and give credit where credit is due. Some of you here this morning: your life was a wreck, a complete shambles, but then God rescued you, pulled you out of the pit, gave you hope, and filled your life with a sense of purpose. You're a completely different person than you were 5 or 10 years ago. Give God the praise! It's not that hard.

And what's the worst thing that will come if you do that? Someone over Facebook will be offended? Then I doubt they were really your "friend" to begin with. For a true friend would be happy for you, not tear into you.

Give God the praise.

15:28

This is just a little line in the context of the Jerusalem Council here in Acts 15. It was that council that endorsed the practice that had already been going on of witnessing to Gentiles about their turning to faith in Jesus Christ and that when they actually DID come to faith in Christ, not requiring them to then observe the Old Testament Law of Moses. That is, they were converting to Jesus but not to Judaism.

But here, further on in that same chapter, it had been agreed to send a letter to Gentile converts expressing to them their need to not do things that would be perceived by Jewish converts as LAWLESSNESS. So, in effect, they were going to tell them they didn't need to keep the Law of Moses, but they should not throw that fact into the face of those who were keeping the Law of Moses. So don't create waves. And how did the early church reach that decision?

Verse 28: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

Church work is, in a sense, synergistic work: we work TOGETHER with God. Our salvation is, of course, GOD's WORK in us. That's not our work. But once saved we, of course, do works, many works, and hopefully many works that are pleasing to God. IN THAT SENSE we work with God.

Well in making decisions, we seek God's direction. But that direction is not usually VOID of human input. When Ruth and I are planning a date, I will often ask her, "Where do you want to go to eat." I know that she is going to

say, "Well, not Burger King or McDonalds." I know she is going to say that for we've been married 42 years this month. For me, I don't care. So we don't go to Burger King or McDonalds. We go to a place that we're both fine with.

Look, Burning Hearts is on the cusp of a real change. I turn 70 next year and I'm DONE...at least as being the full time pastor. The elders are already well into the process of finding the next pastor (a truly exciting process I might add). But in the end, some man's name is going to be presented to you to vote on. And when it is all over, whoever is decided upon, our prayer will be that "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" to choose that man. Amen?

Because we don't want to go on WITHOUT the Holy Spirit's blessing...nor WITHOUT YOUR blessing as well.

Acts 17:26a

The context of this verse is that Paul is in Athens and even though he currently alone (waiting for Timothy and others to show up) he has decided to go it alone and speak to the philosophers who were sitting around about the truths of the gospel. And so Paul starts by talking about how he observed a statue to an unknown god, and that how he thought he would like to make known some truths about that unknown god. And so Paul started in, making use of some of the poets and philosophers and what they had written back then.

Verse 26 is believed to be taken from one of these Greek poets. Again, from the NIV, "For in him we live, and move and have our being."

That's a great line. Maybe we would like it more if Jesus had said it, or it was written by David and found in one of the Psalms. But it is a great line and so true.

My existence...your existence...is rooted in God.
 We live because he lives.
 We move or can move because of him
 All that we are is rooted in him.

Take God out of the picture and this entire cosmos collapses.

Friedrich Nietzsche is known for his now famous line that "God is dead" – an idea that came to be again circulated in the 1970s and 80s. But God is not dead. For "in him we live and move and have our being."

The apostle Paul, writing about Jesus, says of him in Colossians 1...
Colossians 1:17

You talk about "string theory" as helping to understand what holds the universe together. Well how about "Christ theory"? For that's what Paul says holds the universe together.

Acts 17:26b

The ordination of where we are and when we are: the times and places of mankind.

Paul SEEMS to be thinking in more general terms regarding the places and times of mankind, but I have OFTEN applied this specifically to my own life.

How did I end up here?

There's a question for YOU this morning: HOW DID YOU END UP HERE? Sure, you came in a car, or maybe your parents drove you. Sure. But the bigger question: how did you end up in church? Why you? A lot of people aren't in church this morning. Why are you in church?

And why this church?

And why at this point in your life?

I can't speak for you but I can say that for my own life, the very idea that God has ORDAINED or DETERMINED where I should be and when has been an INCREDIBLY LIBERATING and EMPOWERING idea.

It is liberating in that, unlike a lot of more liberal Americans, I have no need to feel guilty about who I am, or where I was born, or into what family or family structure I grew up in. GOD ORDAINED the places and times of my life.

And it is empowering in that I can take great heart in the confidence that Almighty God, the Creator of heaven and earth, has ordained my steps.

Back when the Men's Discipleship Group memorized Psalm 139 a few years ago it was verse 5 that every one of us really latched on to: "You hem me in behind and before and lay your hand upon me." That means that God is all around us: he's in front of us, behind us, and over top of us.

Wherever we go God is there...and God is protecting us.

We have a son who is in the army. He's a captain, a leader of men. And currently he is in a part of the world that can be VERY dangerous. God has ordained his "times and places." And we trust in God for exactly that.

Acts 20:27

There is a lot in the Bible we don't understand. The nuances of language, the times, the culture...all these factors lead us to, at times, scratch our heads as to what the writer meant. Added to that are the even more basic questions as to WHY certain things were done (that we understand quite clearly) or WHY they were even recorded. Our unbelieving son has raised this second question (as to WHY certain things are even recorded) as a supposed argument against the truthfulness of scripture. His point is that given all the really BIG questions in the world about God, mankind or truth, WHY would God give over so many pages to material that seems, quite honestly, almost meaningless: like the numbering of various tribes, or the repetition of various phrases when describing the sacrificial system.

It is tempting to SKIP some parts of the Bible. And I, for one, have not been hesitant to say for decades now that while we believe that ALL of the Bible is inspired by God, we do not believe it is all EQUALLY INSPIRING. At least that is the way I see it.

But we don't skip over verses. We don't skip over verses that are difficult, or doctrines that don't strike us right, or teachings that make us uncomfortable. At Burning Hearts (and I would say at every true church) we'll deal with whatever is coming our way. Some of what we read will be troubling; some of it we won't know quite what to do with it. But if this is "God's Word" – God's revelation to mankind...God's counsel to mankind as to how we should live – then we will, at this church, and as long as I am alive, declare

to you "the whole counsel of God." Nothing is off limits; nothing is cut out...nothing.

Acts 24:15

Here we have Paul talking to the first of two governors of Judea: Felix. And in passing he makes the point that the resurrection of the dead is for everyone: the just and the unjust.

In our day there has been a renewed turning of many evangelicals away from the notion of hell, a place of eternal conscious suffering. In that way, not much has changed through the centuries as there have been various Christians, here or there, through the centuries, that have espoused everything from a universal salvation of every person (called "Universalism") to the idea that God will simply annihilate all unbelievers (called "annihilationism").

While Acts 24:15 doesn't address the false teaching of Universalism, it does add some credibility to the notion that those who are deemed ungodly, unholy, lawless, unrighteous or unjust...what we might more simply call the unbeliever"...that these people, like the godly, are resurrected by God, granted, like the righteous, immortal, imperishable bodies, and that in these immortal, imperishable bodies, they will be sentenced (if Revelation 20:14 is correct) to an eternity in what is there described as a "lake of fire." We have called such a lake "hell," and Jesus a number of times referenced the "hell of fire."

Maybe we have misunderstood; maybe we are wrong. But this has been, quite consistently, the teaching of the church from its very earliest years...that in the words of many evangelists..."eternity lies before us all: heaven or hell...and either destiny is only a heartbeat away. Today is the day of salvation, so do not harden your heart."

And lastly...

Acts 26:27-28

Here Paul has been telling his story – witnessing to Festus (the new governor) and to King Agrippa and his wife Bernice. Clearly Paul has, in

this time, gotten quite passionate about what he was saying and then, in verse 27 he in effect asks Agrippa if he doesn't agree with what Paul has been saying. And then, in verse 28, whether Agrippa was being honest with Paul or he was really just trying to safe face before his wife, Festus and those around them he says, in effect,

Do you really think that in such a short time I would be persuaded to become a Christian?

And while Paul doesn't directly answer Agrippa's question with a "yes" or "no" one gets the impression that Paul actually believed that, yes, that was enough time.

Some years ago I heard a fellow talking about the ministry of Jews for Jesus in Israel. He told about missionaries who had come to Israel hoping to get established, earn the respect of those around them, get jobs, make friends and...over time...try and be a witness for Jesus to the Jewish people there.

And then Jews for Jesus came into their area. And they were bold, and loud and, comparatively to these Christians who had been living there, in the faces of the people. They were quite offended by the actions of Jews for Jesus.

But...and here was the catch...Jews for Jesus was having a TREMENDOUS EFFECT with many of the Jewish people coming to faith in Jesus.

There is no better witness than the witness of a friend to a friend. And to have gained the respect of those around us does, in fact, earn us some right to speak to our friends and neighbors.

But God can save a person in a day. It doesn't always take 30 or 40 years. And Agrippa had the potential of being "won to Christ" (as we would say) in a single day, by means of a single witness of a single man in chains.

For God works in different ways with different people. Let us never HOLD BACK in making the gospel known out of concern that they just wouldn't have enough time to take it all in. Who knows what God may have been

doing in their life over the course of weeks, months or years, preparing their hearts for your witness.

The Bible says that some plant and others water. Still other get to come along and just pull the fruit right off the vine.

If you EVER sense that the fruit is ripe, go ahead and pull it off. You don't want to miss that opportunity.

A closing story:

Many years ago now I visited a couple who had started attending the church. They had a very troubled son who had started attending the church earlier and now they were effectively following him. So while at the house I spoke with this couple at length about their son (who suffered from schizophrenia). Finally, sensing I had been there long enough, I said,

"Well, I should be going. But I wouldn't be much of a pastor if I didn't at least ask you 'Are you right with God? Have you asked Jesus to come into your life and save you?' And with that I turned to the man and said, "Jesse, do you know the Lord?" And with that TEARS...a FLOOD OF TEARS began to flow from his eyes. "Jesse, have you never asked Jesus to come into your life?" He shook his head no. "Have you never asked him to forgive you of your sins?" And again he shook his head.

"Jesse, would you like to ask Jesus right now...today...to save you?" And, again, while the tears were flowing down his cheeks he shook his head up and down.

I then turned to his wife and asked if she knew the Lord and she said she did.

I took some minutes and then read from the Bible various verses about getting right with God. And with that, I closed the Bible, we three knelt down in front of their couch in their living room, and Jesse Riehl prayed and asked Jesus to come into his life that day.

We don't know what happened to Agrippa or Bernice in the long run. But even in a single day, they could have been saved.