

## Turning the World Right-side Up

Acts 17:1-15

*“These men who have **turned the world upside down** have come here also...”*

**Introduction:** As is our normal rhythm for the start of the year, we want to step back and take a couple of weeks to look at the year ahead. We believe this is healthy for individuals, families, and churches, to take a bit of time to evaluate life in light of the truth, identify areas that need improvement, and make appropriate changes. Making small changes along the way often keeps us away from major course corrections in the future. Often when it comes to *vision casting* for the future people can get the impression that we need to roll out big ventures, new programs, or audacious goals for it to feel like a real vision. But we have resonated with a statement that Kevin DeYoung once made to pastors and churches as they considered the future: *we want to be “PLODDING VISSIONARIES”*, meaning we recognize that God has much for us in the future, but we ALSO have many responsibilities in the present and live in the midst of the un-glamorous. Life is complicated, messy, hard, full, and busy, which compels some to skip steps and simply try to save the world, or join a cause, or do something else that makes them feel good in the moment. We want to lean into all that God has for us now and prepare ourselves for what He has planned for the future, whether that’s more church plants, sending out missionaries, or joyously continuing to make disciples here....or all the above.

Praying and thinking about what would be helpful for us moving forward, and continuing the challenge Pastor Steve gave last week in terms of making disciples, two verses came to my mind:

- 1) **1 Chronicles 12:32** – *“Of Issachar, men who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do...”*
- 2) **Acts 17:6** – *“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also...”*

Two seemingly disconnected passages (admittedly), each have a “vision” feel, but both are intimately tied to understanding and commitment to God’s Word. The men of Issachar differentiated themselves among the tribes of Israel NOT for their military strength like Ephraim who had 20,800 men of valor or Asher who had 40,000 seasoned troops ready for battle (1 Chron. 12:30, 36), but they understood what was going on around them *in light of God’s will*, so they knew exactly what to do! If our church, families, and leaders are marked with this attribute, we could confidently say our future is clear. You can have all the strength, numbers, or experience, but if you do not know God and His will, you will quickly deplete your resources and wander aimlessly, chasing every fad and cultural norm that comes around.

But what really captured my heart was this phrase in Acts 17, “men who have turned the world upside down.” This verse is every vision casters dream, calling people to an audacious goal, leaving a mark, and making life count! “In a world that is upside down, let’s turn it right-side up!” That has podcast, conference, and book written all over it! But considering the context of Acts 17, something much deeper, better, and closer to home comes into view. This was not a call for the church to turn the world upside down, it simply illustrated that when followers of Jesus are committed to knowing, loving, and living out God’s World, God will do some phenomenal things. In other words, God takes care of **results and receives glory when He works**. What He calls us to do is walk by faith, to pursue Him wholeheartedly, and to submit in joyful obedience!

This is why the goal of the next 2 weeks is not a passionate plea to stir your emotions to do more and fix the world. My concern has more to do how we are approaching everyday life, thriving in the mundane and

joyfully pursuing Christ each day. As a pastor, I can wax eloquent about this ideal life and you then leave and say, “My life is so far from what you’re talking about. I just want to get some sleep after having multiple little kids in the house. I feel disconnected from my spouse, don’t feel like I have any friends, am lonely, depressed, sad, or exhausted. ‘Turn the world upside down???!’ How about helping me through this rhythm rut I’m in – I go to work (or take care of the kids all day – and the house is still a mess after cleaning it 10 times!), come home and take care of the kids, veg out on my phone for 3 hours, have a drink to unwind, show up to church on Sunday, and repeat the whole process tomorrow!”

What we find in Acts 17 helps us address this at the level of motivation and clarity. The answer to the conundrum of radical, joyful obedience and the mundane rhythm of life is our interaction with Scripture in our pursuit of Christ. These two weeks I want to challenge each of us to **evaluate and consider** our relationship with both Christ and His Word. *When was the last time you read the Bible out of pure delight? Have you read and studied in order to know your Savior and God more thoroughly? Have you hidden God’s Word in your heart so that it is on your mind and falls quickly from your lips?* I love asking friends about what they are passionate about: politics, sports, art, music, movies, or their business. Even the most introverted of us can talk someone’s ear off when the topic is of a particular passion. But far too often we DO NOT TALK ABOUT the Lord, what we are learning, or how God is changing us with the same type of passion or clarity, and this is a direct result of a lack of intake, desire, or simply a failure to discipline ourselves.

Before wading into the waters of Acts 17, I want to ask all of you to take out your Bibles in whatever form you have them, and open up to **Psalm 119**. I would challenge each of you to read this rather lengthy Psalm (22 stanzas following the Hebrew alphabet), to **observe how the Psalmist interacts with God’s Word**. This is an immensely personal Psalm, not one written about someone else’s experience but from an intimate relationship and pursuit of God and His Word. Scripture is to be read from an *insider perspective, not an outsider*. I was talking with a friend this week about his experience in the Marines. I could understand what he was talking about since I’ve studied military history, know some about the bases he’s served in, and saw the movie *Fury* about a tank commander. But I only know these as an outsider, not as one who has been trained and lived it out. Sometimes people exist in the church as outsiders, listening to others experiences, trading on their growth and learning, but only as an observer, not an insider. This is **imperative, since Scripture is both AUTHORITY AND SUFFICIENT**, but it is also given to us as a special revelation that applies to all people but is also like a personal love letter from God to each of us.

This Psalm gives us **4 marks or principles of interaction with Scripture**. It weaves between statements of **DESIRE, COMMITMENT, REQUEST, and BENEFIT**.

Look with me over **3 stanzas (Psalm 119:1-16; 97-104)** and see this pattern:

**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 righteous rules.*  
 8 *I will keep your statutes;*  
*do not utterly forsake me!*

<p><sup>9</sup> <b>How can a young man keep his way pure?</b> By guarding it according to your word.</p> <p><sup>10</sup> With my <u>whole heart</u> I seek you; <u>let me not wander from your</u> <u>commandments!</u></p> <p><sup>11</sup> <i>I have stored up</i> your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.</p> <p><sup>12</sup> Blessed are you, O LORD; <u>teach me</u> your statutes!</p> <p><sup>13</sup> <b>With my lips I declare</b> <b>all the rules of your mouth.</b></p> <p><sup>14</sup> In the way of your testimonies I <u>delight</u> as much as in all riches.</p> <p><sup>15</sup> <i>I will meditate</i> on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways.</p> <p><sup>16</sup> <u>I will delight</u> in your statutes; <i>I will not forget your word.</i></p>	<p>Oh how <i>I love your law!</i> It is my meditation all the day.</p> <p><sup>98</sup> Your commandment makes me <b>wiser than</b> <b>my enemies,</b> for it is ever with me.</p> <p><sup>99</sup> <b>I have more understanding than all my</b> <b>teachers,</b> for your testimonies are my meditation.</p> <p><sup>100</sup> <b>I understand more than the aged,</b> for I keep your precepts.</p> <p><sup>101</sup> <b>I hold back my feet from every evil way,</b> in order to keep your word.</p> <p><sup>102</sup> <b>I do not turn aside from your rules,</b> for you have taught me.</p> <p><sup>103</sup> <i>How sweet</i> are your words to my taste, <i>sweeter than honey to my mouth!</i></p> <p><sup>104</sup> Through your precepts I <b>get</b> <b>understanding;</b> therefore I hate every false way.</p>
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Notice that all of these factors of desire, commitment, and request combine and overlap. **How does our desire for Scripture grow?** By committing ourselves to read and know it. **What do we do when we don't understand?** We ask God to give us understanding. **How do I value Scripture more?** I see it as more important than any money overtime can bring. **How do I see through the deception of this world and gain wisdom and understanding in life?** *Commit myself to know and keep God's commands in light of His glory and grace.* This is NOT unlike the physical commitments we make at the New Year: How do I grow an appetite for vegetables? I eat more vegetables. How do I get in shape and be able to exercise longer with less pain afterward? I start exercising.

If we understand this to be the way to read and understand Scripture, what does it look like in action? Now let's look at Acts 17 and examine how pursuing Christ in His word **MOTIVATES, CLARIFIES, AND BRINGS BOTH POWER AND CONFLICT.**

### Scripture is the Source of Motivation

Motivation is a problem for most people. Motivation is the difference between ability and success, the missing component for so many who fail to maximize their potential – in athletics or in business or personal growth. But motivation is far too often missing in those who declare that they are followers of Jesus Christ. Churches have tried all kinds of different methods to motivate their membership to serve and share, from programs to training, from events to giveaways, in order to move people from **pew sitters** to active participants. But is that the path forward? Are we motivated by what we get, or by how much money we can bring in, or how many people participated? There has to be something far greater and deeper to motivate us (I hope) or else we are left relying on gimmicks and misdirection.

Paul was a uniquely motivated man. He was driven and passionate before following Christ, achieving earthly success as a religious leader and Pharisee (Phil. 3:5-6). But when Christ saved him on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9), everything changed. He stopped living for his own glory and was focused on the **glory of God and Christ** (Rom. 8:18; Eph. 1:12). He went from persecuting the church to promoting it, from killing Christians to making disciples, from denying Christ to magnifying Him. Life became **singular**,

and everything, from travel to working as a tent-maker to teaching was geared to glorify Christ and make Him known. Paul was given a **specific mission**, as he was a *chosen instrument of Christ* who would carry the name of Jesus and the gospel to both **Jews and Gentiles**, and this would all take place through the pathway of **suffering** (Acts 9:15-16). ***Does that sound familiar? It should.*** It's exactly what Steve preached on last week, as every true disciple of Christ is called to make disciples in Christ, and this will take work, involve suffering, and may lead to persecution. The specific call to Paul and the general call to every Christian is the same in essence, so what motivated Paul will certainly motivate us.

God was faithful to His Word. After a successful **first missionary journey** (Acts 13-14), and after a sad separation from Barnabas and John Mark, Paul ventured out with Silas and Timothy on a **Second journey**. Finding great success in the city of Philippi, including the conversion of Lydia and casting out demons (Acts 16:11-18), Paul and Silas were wrongly beaten with rods, put in painful shackles, and thrown into a dark, dank prison. This did not deter them from **singing hymns to God** (Acts 16:25) and praying, and they used this terrible circumstance into an opportunity for the gospel, seeing their jailer and his whole family become a saved Christ follower. After it was known that Paul was a Roman citizen (oops....the city officials were in big trouble), they asked Paul to leave. Following the Egnatian Way, Paul moved from Amphipholis to Apollonia, and came to the major city of Thessalonica. It was here one of Paul's most treasured churches was born.

Now I want us to stop for a second and just consider what our mindset would be at this point. We are still recovering from rod-cracking wounds, being wrongly imprisoned and run out of town. Perhaps we would slow down a bit. Maybe consider switching methods? But Paul was not only undeterred, he doubled-down on the mission and the method. He came **boldly and courageously** into Thessalonica armed with the message of the gospel and the source of the Scripture. His modus operandi of ministry was to approach the Jews first and when they rejected, to move onto the non-Jews of the area. Starting in the Synagogue, Paul set out with a simple and straight forward approach:

*Acts 27:2-4 – “And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he **reasoned** with them **from the Scriptures**, 3 **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.” 4 And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.”*

Before looking at the clarity of the message, notice two things about what motivated Paul. 1) **He was motivated to do evangelism because his goal was to make disciples**, and that meant explaining Jesus as the Messiah so that people could follow Him. His *“heart’s desire and prayer to God for them was that they may be saved”* (Rom. 10:1). Paul knew judgment was real, and that eternity was in the balance, so he was motivated to share Christ with those from his own Jewish heritage. 2) **He knew the power of the Scripture to change lives**. When you have the antidote to death and the message of life, have experienced it yourself, know the source of that power, you don't keep it hidden. The gospel is designed to be proclaimed, explained, and shared.

Just like we saw in Psalm 119, where desire grows with interaction, so too does our motivation. Paul was motivated out of the knowledge and mission God had given him, and was aware that when people come to grips with the person and work of Jesus Christ, they can be transformed. **For a born again believer, there is no greater motivation than that in committing ourselves to knowing Christ, His Word, and living it out**. If we have been sluggish in our desire to share our faith, or in prioritizing our time to talk to others about Christ, or to pray for opportunities to do so, it most likely signals that we are

out of regular, desirous, ongoing study of God's Word. If you want to regain your motivation, commit to knowing Christ and ask God to give you understanding, and then discipline yourself to study.

### Scripture is the Source of Clarity

When Paul came in the synagogue in Thessalonica, he entered in respectfully, since it was customary to be invited in for discussion. Notice that he spent 3 total days with this group, not in a hit and run way, but spent time *reasoning*, the word that means "dialogue". He had a discussion with the people in the synagogue over 3 weeks' time; I'm sure with the group coming back each week with more questions. But the conversation was not about politics or Rome, but an interaction sourced in Scripture, which meant Paul HAD TO KNOW the Scripture in order to do this. Often we feel inadequate to share our faith because we do not know the Bible ourselves, which simply reveals our lack of desire or discipline to know it. Notice a few principles of Paul's interaction here:

- 1) **His message centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ** – The main issue in salvation is Jesus, since there is no other name by which a person can be saved (Acts 4:12).
- 2) **His message proved Jesus was the Messiah** – How someone defines and understands Jesus is paramount. If people have heard about Him (most people in Simi have) but have not come to grips with the fact that He is the ONLY way to salvation, that is the information that needs to be explained and proved.
- 3) **He proved and explained Jesus as the Messiah from the OT Scripture** – Again, this is an important point since he was dealing with a Jewish audience, who knew and read the OT, but who missed the Messiah Jesus: **John 5:39-40 says** "*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life*".
- 4) **He majored on the fact that Messiah had to suffer, die, and rise again** – The Jewish audience was looking for a Messiah, but not one who would suffer and die! This was a **stumbling block to them** (1 Cor. 1:23). But Paul knew this, and leaned in. He did not try to work around this fact (just believe these other things and we'll work the whole resurrection thing out later!) but proved Jesus was the fulfillment of the OT Scripture. Perhaps he explained Isaiah 53, or focused on Psalm 16 or 22, which pointed to the death of Messiah. Paul did not shy away from hard discussions or controversial ones, but he let the Scripture explain it all.
- 5) **He called for a total change of loyalty** – We will see next week that his call to the pagan city of Athens was **repentance** (Acts 17:30), but it is clear here that he called all who would listen to absolute loyalty to King Jesus. The call to salvation is not simply a call of the forgiveness of sins (which it IS ABSOLUTELY THAT), but a transfer of kingdoms, of masters, of Lords.

This message caught hold, since he was not calling for nominal niceness but radical transformation. There were so many that followed in such a passionate way that it stirred up jealousy among the Jewish leaders of the city, and they formed a mob and ran Paul out of town. Not only that, but when Paul went 50 miles down the road to a nothing town called Berea, they followed him there!

What do we take away from this? **1)** We never take for granted that people in Simi Valley or even in this church have actually read the Bible for themselves. Sometimes we assume they have, but what Paul did was put the Word on display and had people wrestle with IT, not philosophy, science, or pop culture. **2)**

**Nominal Christianity and a nominal call to salvation is not going to cut it in our day** (though it has never cut it). The call to follow Christ is radical in its simplicity. We are called to turn from our sin and former loyalties and pursue Christ, the fountain of living waters, through His Word by His Spirit. If we are NOT doing that, we must examine ourselves and our faith in Him. **3) There is great power in the Word of God.** Sometimes ministry can get discouraging (especially when I'm focused on myself), since we cannot GIVE faith to someone, cannot fix them, cannot make them believe. We have the greatest message of the world, but just like Paul experienced, many/most will reject it, hate it, and even hate us. But what keeps us going as a church to make disciples is we KNOW that when someone comes face to face with Christ in His Word, transformational life change will happen.

I was studying for this sermon this week when I had coffee with a young man who used to attend our college group, married a beautiful young woman from here, moved up to the tech capital of California, and they have been raising their two kids together. He has a great job. They attend a Bible preaching church. From the outside looking in, everything looked solid. Smart and capable, but he was miserable. Depressed at work, going through the motions at home, numbing himself at night....and rinse and repeat. What changed? He told me that a few months ago he tried reading different things (Moby Dick, Walden), and then remembered his pastor mentioned a believer has a "worn out Bible". So he started to read in Matthew. He began to read, and could not stop. He couldn't wait to get home at night to read. And as he read, he came face to face with his own sin and His Savior. God saved Him and transformed him through the study, searching, and reading of the Bible. I asked him when was the last time he had read the Bible, having gone to Christian school, had a Christian home, and went to church. The answer: *never*. But now he wants to share his story with everyone. He wants to tell people in the dark tech sector about Jesus. He wants to serve and love his family. He is completely new, transformed not by a program or praying a prayer, but with coming to grips with the gospel through the Word. These are the ones we live on in ministry!

Is this a formula? Is this magic? No, but it reminds us of the power of God's Word, and so often the lack of interaction with it. So I leave you with this: ***have you come to grips with Christ the Messiah, the King and Lord, who died and rose again to offer forgiveness, so that we can repent of our sin, turn from our own way, and follow Him with our whole heart? That is the question that will spur this church on to thinking right side up, and the answer to this question will be the impetus to turn the world upside down.***