

2020: The Global Year of the Bible

A Lamp and a Light, Part 1

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How can I possibly give an overview of the Scriptures in our reading plan from the first four days of the new year that span from the Creation of all things to the Fall of humanity, to Noah and the Great Flood, to the Tower of Babel, to the beginning of the family of Abraham, the Patriarchal Period – in about 20 minutes? Yikes!

This is going to be a real challenge for your preachers all year, but we are trusting God to show us what is (or are) the most important theme(s) from our week's readings that will keep us all engaged and moving forward through this Year of the Bible! Let's make sure that we are praying for each other. Deal?

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your Word. We thank you for the truth we find there that helps us know your heart and your plan for us. We thank you that it is so clear how you are speaking to us sometimes, and we thank you that when it isn't as clear, that your Holy Spirit helps us understand what is most important to understand. Help us now in these minutes to get our best start. This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

I have titled this series of sermons for the year, "A Lamp and a Light" after Psalm 119:105, "Your word is a lamp for my feet, and a light on my path." Allow me to read from the great commentary on the Psalms, The Treasury of David, by Charles Haddon Spurgeon – considered one the greatest preachers of all time who lives in the 1800's. About the lamp for our feet and the light on our path he writes, "We are walkers through the city of this world, and we are often called to go into its darkness. Never venture there without the light-giving word, lest you slip. Use God's word personally, practically, and habitually to see the way and what lies in it. When darkness settles around me, the Lord's word, like a flaming torch, reveals my way.

Having no fixed lamps in certain ancient towns, each person carried a lantern to avoid falling into the open sewer or stumbling over the heaps of manure that defiled the road. This is a true picture of our path through this dark world. We would not know the way or how to walk in it if the Scripture, like a blazing torch, did not reveal it. One of the most practical benefits of the Bible is guidance in the acts of daily life. Scripture is not sent to astound us with its brilliance, but to guide us by its instruction. It is true that the head needs illumination, but the feet need direction even more, lest both head and feet fall into a ditch. Happy is the one who personally appropriates God's word and practically uses it as comfort and counsel, as a lamp to the feet.

It is a lamp by night, a light by day, and a delight at all times. David guided his steps by it. He saw the difficulties of his road from its beams. Whoever walks in darkness will stumble sooner or later. The person who walks by the light of day or by the lamp of night does not stumble, but keeps upright. Ignorance about practical subjects is painful; it breeds indecision and anxiety, and these are uncomfortable. The word of God, by imparting heavenly knowledge, leads to decision, and when that is followed by determined resolution, as in this case, it brings great restfulness of heart."

In the Midwest there are often blizzards that produce complete white-out conditions. You wouldn't think even in such storms that a farmer who knows his land like the back of his hand would have trouble making it to the barn and back, but it happens. The solution? Farmers hitch a rope from the back door of house to the barn door. That way, they can keep hold of the rope and make sure they don't lose their way even when they can't see 6" in front of them.

God's word is meant to be that lamp, that light, that rope for us. And it is exactly that when as Spurgeon said we use it personally, practically, and habitually. Personally, practically, and habitually.

Some researchers insist that it takes 21 days to develop a new habit. Three weeks. But let's think about that. If we are developing a bad habit, two repetitions is probably enough.

Order a doughnut with your coffee on Monday morning and Tuesday morning, and you'll probably find it very hard to resist ordering a doughnut on Wednesday.

But try to start a new good habit and **21** days isn't nearly long enough for it to stick. According to a recent study, a daily action like eating fruit at lunch or running for 15 minutes took an average of **66** days to become as much of a habit as it would ever become.

Some of us are trying to develop a daily habit of reading our Bibles as we begin this new year. It's not going to happen naturally or easily, friends. We're going to have to be intentional about this, spurring one another on, praying for each other. We will miss a day here and a day there. It's okay. Don't give up, just keep pressing on. The goal is to get to the point where we aren't thinking about not having the doughnut or having the apple, we are just making the better choice habitually and it feels right and good! (And when we don't make the better choice it feels like something is missing, it doesn't feel right and it doesn't feel good.). God's word is a lamp for our feet and a light on our path! We want to use it personally, practically, and habitually because when we do, we keep moving ourselves in the best direction we can possibly go and can influence the people around us to do the same!

So, in Genesis 1-11 we go from there being nothing and no one but God, to God creating the heavens and the earth, separating the land from the waters, the light from the darkness, the sun from the moon, creating trees, plants, animals, birds, fish, and finally creating human beings. We go from beautiful, peaceful, easily fruitful and flourishing garden-living (The Garden of Eden) where there was nothing but love and full communication between God and Adam & Eve, to disobedience, fear, shame, guilt, blame, and separation from God and one another. The first child was born outside the garden gates knowing nothing except the reality of the sin that so easily entangles us. Jealousy, anger, murder, speaking lies, engaging in marriage with more than one woman, you name it, it took no more than 10 generations (from Adam to Noah) for human beings, God's most treasured creation, to push God to the point of deciding to get rid of all of us. Genesis 6:5-8 tells us this, *"The Lord observed the extent of human wickedness on the earth, and he saw that everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil. So the Lord was sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth. It broke his heart. And the Lord said, "I will wipe this human race I have created from the face of the earth. Yes, and I will destroy every living thing—all the people, the large animals, the small animals that scurry along the ground, and even the birds of the sky. I am sorry I ever made them."*

Part of me reads that and thinks, "God knows all things, so surely God knew it was going to be this way. God sees all time all at once. Surely our behavior didn't catch him off-guard." But maybe what did surprise Him was how much it hurt. He was sorry he ever made us. That's pretty bad, folks. But then God sees Noah and we read this, *"But Noah found favor with the Lord."*

God chose to send a flood over all the earth, and yet preserve humankind and start fresh with just Noah, his wife, his three sons, and their wives. Wash the earth clean and start again! That was the plan. But sin quickly finds its way back into the lives of those saved by the flood – as characterized by the building of the Tower of Babel – this high tower that the people wanted to build to make themselves great. What about making God great in their lives? God dispersed them so that they would come to rely once again on Him and seek Him and His ways, but for most of the people, it simply didn't compute until God made himself known to Abram, the father of the Hebrew nation.

Let's make sure we don't miss this: Abram (later called Abraham) was an 8th generation grandson of Shem, one of the three sons of Noah, who was an 8th generation grandson of Adam. Those who came from Shem were called the Shemites – or as we know them today – Semites – the Hebrew people, who have battled against violence and slavery and prejudice and pride and annihilation, territorialism & discrimination from the first days until now. Just two weeks ago, President Trump signed into law the Anti-Semitism Awareness act, important now because of rising incidences of anti-semitism in our own country. As the writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us, *"There is nothing new under the sun."*

On Thursday of this past week my family received an amazing gift. A good friend of mine, for whom I led his mother's funeral two days after Christmas, remembered something that he had had in his desk drawer for over 35 years. It was a live recording of my parents before they were married, my mom being 22 and my dad 33, when they were invited to sing on the Grand Ole Opry (now the Ryman Theater). The date was October 14, 1950. We have recordings of the song they sang, "Father, Put the Cow Away," but we had never heard how it happened that they received the invitation to sing and never heard the pre-interview before they sang. My friend worked in New Jersey with the guy who had the recording. He says this, "Sometime in the early 80's we were talking about Chambersburg, his love of baseball and Nellie Fox, and we landed on the subject of WCBG and your Dad. That sparked something in his mind that he thought he had a tape somewhere with him (and your Mom) on it." Thirty-five years later, it is now in our possession.

The day I received the tape, I listened to it many times in amazement and then recorded it on my phone so I could send it to all my siblings, then I went to the dry cleaners on Wayne Avenue to take the church's big tablecloth that we used on Christmas Eve to be cleaned and pressed. I've been going to this same cleaner for years, but on Thursday there was a woman at the counter who I had never seen before. When she asked for my name, I told her, and as she wrote out my name she said, "I know who you are. You're Bud and Molly's daughter. I used to live on the 2nd floor of the radio station apartment building. I watched you grow up." That was pretty wild, especially after just hearing the recording from 1950. Then, about an hour later John and I attended Patti Rebok's retirement party. I was introduced to Gary's dad for the first time, who immediately started talking about my parents and going to their festivals and how much he missed those days. It was quite a day thinking about my parents – a day when I was deep into these Scriptures in Genesis and asking God, "What's the theme here – what's the big idea you want us to grab hold of this week?" As soon as I got still at the end of the day, it started to come together.

Where we came from and who we came from matters. Whether our lives were hard or easy with our parents or grandparents or aunts or uncles, etc. where we came from and who we came from matters. There are attitudes and traits and habits that are passed onto us that we consciously or subconsciously took hold of as our own. The music and the desire to connect with people came to me honestly and effortlessly from my mom and dad. I recognize the gifts they gave me and I'm grateful. Where we came from and who we came from matters. God doesn't waste anything. Even if your family origins were rough, that makes you who you are as a determined overcomer!

But if someone would ask me, as the main character in the recent movie *Overcomer* was asked, "Who are you?" I wouldn't first say, "I'm Bud and Molly's kid." I wouldn't first say, "I'm a wife. I'm a mother. I'm a grandmother. I'm a pastor. I'm a piano player. I'm a Penn State Football fan. I'm a reader, etc." The first words out of my mouth would be, "I'm a child of God. I'm a disciple of Jesus."

All the genealogies we see in the Bible are important because they establish a connection to who came before and before and before. They establish the history of our faith family, a history that is real and historically accurate and more and more proved by archeological finds. But ultimately, folks, ultimately what matters is who we are at the core of our beings. Ultimately, where did we come from and from whom did we come? Psalm 139:13 proclaims, "*For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.*"

- Out of nothing, we came from God.
- God breathed life into us.
- As those who bear his image, God gave us the purpose of being fruitful and multiplying the number of those who know and understand and celebrate and announce to others their own beginnings by God's gracious hand.
- God gave us freedom to live and love and tend, and reign and rule over all the plants and animals, using them as he intended.

- And God gave us boundaries within which to exercise the freedom he gave without diminishing it in any way. "Eat from all the trees except the one in the middle." Boundaries are necessary to preserve our freedom.

Who are you? As a human being made in the image of God, as one who has put your faith in Jesus Christ, you are given the right to be called **a child of God**. And as a child of God, I guarantee that you were not meant to carry the weight of the world around with you. I guarantee we were not made to carry all the stress some of us are carrying. As those made in his image, that's not the plan. We were not made to carry the stresses of this world as we try to make ourselves, or our children, or our church, or our workplace great. We weren't made for that. We were made to carry his glory. We were made to be bearers of the glory of God, for his name's sake, for the building of his kingdom, and for the replanting and reflowering of that place where we are once again in full communion with the one who made us.

Jesus gets us there. He has always been the way, the truth, and the life. Try as we might, no one comes back to the Father except through him. As we continue to push deeper into Genesis this week, remember where you came from and who you are as his child, and may that awareness make a difference in the way you interact with your family, your friends, your co-workers, the waitress, and the cashier at the grocery store. Though we ran from Him, he never stopped pursuing us as we will see all year long as we journey through his Word.

Let me speak Spurgeon's words one more time as we close, "*We are walkers through the city of this world, and we are often called to go into its darkness. Never venture there without the light-giving word, lest you slip. Use God's word personally, practically, and habitually to see the way and what lies in it. When darkness settles around me, the Lord's word, like a flaming torch, reveals my way.*" Amen.