

The Living Word of God

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Acts 23:6-10

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

*God wants us
to know Christ
more, so that
we may live
more like
Christ.*

At Your Word, good and great God, the heavens and earth were created, and by Your Word, new life is given, now and forever. Open our ears, minds, hearts—of these Your beloved sons and daughters, that we may hear Your special Word spoken to us today. Amen.

You and I often say that we wish we could more clearly know God's will for our lives. We wish we could more plainly know God's will for our lives. This morning, I want to tell you, with great certainty, what God's will is for our lives. Here it is: God wants you and me to know Christ more. God wants us to know Christ more, so that we may live more like Christ.

God isn't interested much in us knowing more about Christ. Instead, God is most interested in us knowing Christ for who He uniquely is, a Savior and a friend. And here is the best way to know Christ. God gives us the Holy Scriptures, the Bible. We have God's Word so that we can come to know the Living Word, Christ Jesus himself!

The Bible is the theme this morning. So I'd love for us to look at the Bible with eyes of love. It is Bible Sunday for our 3rd Graders. Lisa has just shared her love story with God through Scripture. Today is Reformation Sun-

day, Martin Luther nailing those 95 protest theses on the SchlossKirche (Castle Church) doors in Wittenberg, Germany, 492 years ago!

In our Scripture today, Paul appears before the Sanhedrin (the Supreme Court of ancient Israel—71 elders of Jewish law, Jewish thought). A violent dispute breaks out in the Jerusalem assembly between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, because they have different views on the resurrection of the dead. They place Paul at the center of the controversy.

When Paul noticed that some were Sadducees and others were Pharisees, he called out in the council, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead." When Paul said this, a dissension began between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. [The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, or angel, or spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge all three.] Then a great clamour arose, and certain scribes of the Pharisees' group stood up and contended, "We find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" When the dissension became violent, the tribune, fearing that they would tear Paul to pieces, ordered the soldiers to go down, take Paul by force, and bring

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him into the barracks (Acts 23:6-10).

How tragic! Standing before them is Paul, one of Christ's greatest ambassadors. Here is a man who has met Jesus face-to-face on the road to Damascus. Here is a man forever changed by his real life encounter with the Risen Christ. What an opportunity for this assembly to hear Paul tell what it means to KNOW Jesus! What an opportunity for them to hear Paul tell of his LOVE for Jesus, like this: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me"(Galatians 2:20). But the Pharisees and the Sadducees miss it. They are more interested in having correct knowledge about a theological idea—about the Resurrection from the Dead. They miss the chance of a lifetime: to come to KNOW JESUS—the living, breathing proof of this very idea!

Now, before we jump in to judge these faithful Jewish leaders, you and I miss it, too. There are Christians, students of the Bible, who know every jot and tittle of Scripture. But they don't know Jesus. We can get so caught up in having knowledge that we miss the point of knowledge—the point that the end goal is to know Christ. As Lisa Baltzer said, "Scripture is more than religion, and information, and rules for living (important, yes). The Bible is, most of all, filled with God's love, and

forgiveness, and God's desire to be in relationship with us."

Paul instructs Timothy: "All Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness"(2 Timothy 3:16). We believe that Scripture is first over other religious and spiritual writings—first over church tradition, first over personal religious experiences. As we Reformers put it, Sola Scriptura, Scripture alone stands. We believe that everything in the Bible either looks forward to Christ or flows from Christ—from Genesis to Revelation. Christ, the LOGOS: "And the WORD became FLESH, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). This is an ancient book. But still, hundreds of centuries later, it is still the Living Word of God. How blessed we are! Ninety-two percent of all American households have a Bible. Apparently, the average American household has three copies of the Bible.

But despite this super-abundance of Bibles, the statistics also show that we have become a biblically illiterate nation. Less than fifty percent can name the first book of the Bible. Only one-third of Americans know who preached the Sermon on the Mount. Over twenty-five percent do not know what is celebrated on Easter (the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.... Um, we are like those Sadducees!). Parts of the Bible are required reading in many high school and college English Lit classes because so many other classic pieces of literature either presume or reference things from the Bible that folks used to know!

***Open yourself
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A man was walking down Alders Gate Street in London many years ago. He was passing by a window and heard someone reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans. The man was so captivated by what was being said that he felt his heart "strangely warmed." You know this man, his name is John Wesley. He not only became one of the greatest evangelists for Christ, but John Wesley spent his changed life advocating and caring for the poorest of the poor in and around London. What is God's will for our lives? To know Christ more, in order to live more like Christ.

Let the Holy Spirit warm you to the Living Word. Open yourself to the Holy Spirit lighting a spark in your heart for desiring Christ. If you are not already doing this, go ahead, dive in, chew on the Word, digest it, and let it nourish you. John Calvin, another great Reformer, wrote, "Build a man a fire [with the written Word of God] and he will be warm for a day; set him on fire [with the living Word of God—Jesus] and he will be warm the rest of his life!"

There are all kinds of exceptional weekly gatherings for going deeper into God's written and living Word: Community Bible Study, Bible Study Fellowship, Creative Living Study, and our own Bible groups here at VPC.

John Ortberg's book, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, has a great chapter on this falling in love with Scripture. He offers four suggestions. First, before you open up your Bible in the morning or

evening, ask God to meet you in Scripture. Before you begin, invite the Holy Spirit, and pray something as honest as this: "God, I don't know what I am doing here in your Word, help me. I want to know you."

Second, read the Bible in a repentant spirit. Ready yourself to surrender everything (those busy thoughts, distractions, to-do lists). Read with a humble heart. Read with a desire to be transformed.

Third, reflect on a brief passage or narrative. Don't bite off too much. Read a little at a time and slowly, like reading a love letter at the peak of romance. Let a few words within a few verses stand out or sink into your heart. In these gentler moments ask, "God, what do you want to say to me in these moments with You?"

And, fourth, take one thought or verse with you throughout the day. Perhaps, let it gradually become memory. "The Lord is my Light and my Salvation; whom shall I fear?" (Psalm 27:1). "I present my body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to you, O God" (Romans 12:1). "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

Three weeks ago, a woman appeared unannounced at our front desk upstairs. She was wanting to talk to a pastor. When we sat down, she told me her Christian name was Sarah, that Jesus had given it to her in a dream through His Word. You need to know this wasn't her name at birth. Sarah grew up in Saudi Arabia, a Muslim. Born and raised as a follower of Mohammad and Islam. Married to a devout Muslim,

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she's lived in the States most of her adult life. Through most of her adult life, she has been getting to know Jesus, to the point of loving Him more and more.

As she was telling her story, Sarah shared that, three years ago, she returned to Saudi Arabia to visit her family. Out for a morning walk, she had forgotten to put on her "niqab" "hijab" face covering. She was stopped by the police, questioned, and taken to the police station. When Sarah's father came and brought her home, her father then proceeded to denounce and disown her for causing "shame and embarrassment" upon his family. She has not seen or heard from her family since.

Sarah told me that, for years now, when her children are in school, she often goes to a public library, quietly, secretly, to read the Bible. "For years I have been reading the Bible, and having dreams, and falling in love with Jesus." Sarah came to our church wanting, asking to become a Christian. So we prayed and Sarah committed her life to Jesus. But she would not take the Bible I offered her at the close of our time. It would be too risky, she explained, to face literal punishment from her family, her community, from her husband. She even had to watch herself coming to our church. Sarah was less concerned for herself and more for what would happen to her children if she was found out by her husband and community to knowing Jesus, I mean really knowing Him, and loving Him, with a Bible in her

hands. So I wrote down on a piece of paper, BibleGateway.com, and gave it to our new sister in Christ.

"I want to know Christ," Paul says, "and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like Christ in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:10-11).

