

January 7, 2006
Does Your Life Need Direction?
Acts 17:1-15

How easily Luke writes of Paul and Silas traveling from Philippi through Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica. It sounds almost as though he is describing a casual drive from Jacksonville to Orlando, passing through a few small towns on the way. But in reality the trip from Philippi to Thessalonica was far more hazardous. Each town was over thirty miles apart with all the perils associated with travel in the ancient world. The distance was over one hundred miles from Philippi to Thessalonica. Robbers, swollen streams, mountains, not to mention hunger and thirst, littered the path on which Paul and Silas traveled. There was nothing easy or comfortable about this journey. This verse appears rather innocuous, more like a transition sentence before Luke gets to the heart of his story, but how difficult these miles must have been for Paul and Silas. What stories Paul would share this morning if only he were here. What happened in these towns? What events transpired along the way? There is just a lot we don't know. What Paul's journey entailed we will never know until we sip coffee and munch on donuts with him in the world to come.

While the journey may have been an adventure in itself, the destination was certainly filled with excitement. As was Paul's custom he visited the local synagogue on a Sabbath day. Remember that in the synagogue there were present both Jews and God-fearers, that is, men and women who were not Jews but were sympathetic toward the faith of Israel. As a stranger and a guest he was invited to read from the Holy Scriptures and make a remark or two about the text for the day.

I think it is an important point that when Paul was asked to speak in a synagogue, he turned to scripture. Of course, the scriptures that Paul read were from the Old Testament. At this time the scriptures consisted entirely of the Old Testament. It would be another two hundred years before the church would affirm the collection of books we now call the New Testament, about the time from our Declaration of Independence to now.

Why do you think Paul relied so heavily on the scriptures in his discussion with Jews and God-fearers? For those of us who come from a church tradition it may seem a silly question. Well, of course, Paul would use scripture. What else would he have used? But if you have not grown up with a church tradition, as I'm sure many in this room have not, then the question is a good one. What is so special about the Bible?

As a pastor I want to answer that question with words like inspiration, authority or maybe even infallible, but those words would have little meaning to many of us in this room. Besides, other religious books such as the Koran and Bhagavad-Gita also claim these very words as well. What places the Bible above all other books in the world? It is a very good question and deserves a careful and reflective response. The real issue is *why* do Christians hold the Bible to be the inspired and authoritative or infallible Word of God?

The Bible didn't just drop down out of heaven neatly bound in leather. I've actually heard people say in a deadly serious way, "If the King James were good enough for Jesus, then it is good enough for me." What many people fail to understand is that the King James itself was translated 1600 years after Jesus. The Bible has a long history, much of which we do not know. Much like the journey that Paul and Silas took from Philippi to Thessalonica, there is much that is hidden from us, much that we will never know this side of heaven.

What we do know is that scripture was not always identified as sacred the moment it was written down or spoken. The prophetic preaching, for instance, was often rejected at the time it was spoken. Interestingly, the popular preachers of the time in which the prophets lived were later considered heretics and the true prophets were persecuted during their lifetime. Go figure! In other words, the Word of God is seldom recognized as the Word of God to the generation in which it is preached. Only later did people begin to study the sermons and writings of the rejected prophets and realize that these words were right on target—why, they were inspired and of God.

A great American passed away last week. Gerald Ford brought much healing to our country during a very difficult time. When President Ford pardoned Richard Nixon in 1974 most people harshly criticized his decision. But now over thirty years later the great majority of scholars and citizens recognize that President Ford was correct in granting pardon to the former president. It took decades before people realized President Ford was right. His words of pardon brought healing to our troubled nation. But it took a long time before people recognized the wisdom of Ford's decision.

In a similar way the authority of the Bible did not happen all at once. The words of true prophets often went unheeded and ignored during their lifetime. Only in hindsight did people come to understand these words as authoritative and of spiritual value. In other words, the proof of scripture was self-evident. The more folks read the holy writings, the more obvious the divine nature of these works. Think of it this way: Don't believe the Bible is true because I say it is; believe the Bible by reading it for yourself and seeing how it has a wonderful light that has led to the transformation of countless lives in the past and how it can lead to the transformation of your life now. If you want to change the direction of your life today, then begin by reading the Bible and allowing scripture to guide your life. The Bible will guide you down a spiritual path that will lead you straight to God. But don't just take my word for it; read it and prove it for yourself.

This is how Israel came to accept scripture as God's word. When the words of the prophets were written down and people read them and listened to them and put the words into practice in their daily lives, they discovered that through these words God spoke to them.

It should not surprise us at all that there are other religious books. Paul writes in Romans 1:20 that God has revealed himself in nature and thus people cannot make excuses that there is no evidence of God. In other words, some of God's nature can be known by just observing the world around us. Other religions no doubt have discerned aspects of God and have written these understandings down. But the Bible brings a clearer picture of his nature to the peoples of the world than any other book.

The brilliant translator, J.B. Phillips, studied the religious books of the world and confessed that there was simply no book quite like the Bible. Compared to the Bible other religious books were cloudy images of God. The Bible alone brings God near to us, near enough to hear his voice, close enough to fellowship with him.

Perhaps you are from a part of the world where the sun rarely shines. You move to sunny Florida and are surprised to discover that the sun shines almost every day. In talking with a friend about the sun you are told to be careful that you do not stay out in the sun too long. If you remain out in the sun for extended periods of time, you will get sunburned. But you do not believe your friend and one summer day go to the ocean and stay out in the sun all day. By the end of the day you are roasted, red as a beet. You learned the hard way that what your friend told you was true. Israel, too, often learned the hard way that scripture is God's word.

I can tell you all day long that the Bible is true but until you experience it for yourself you will never know the full power of what I am trying to say. Read the Bible, pour over it; study it day and night. Let the Bible be a lamp unto your feet and a light unto your path. And then you will see that this old Book is God's Book and it is unlike any book in the world. Why did Paul use scripture? Because he knew the power and force of this divine word.

Before we finish our work for today notice the way Paul reads Scripture. His way of reading the Bible is a good model for us. In verse two and three Luke uses three words to describe Paul's way of reading scripture: "he *reasoned* with them from Scriptures, *explaining* and *proving* that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead" (vv.2-3). These three verbs give special insight into the way we can read scripture.

When Paul *reasoned* he was carefully sifting through scripture, discerning what was in the text. Paul is not a casual reader of the Bible. He is totally attentive to the Word of God. He is as careful with the text as a surgeon

is with a patient during a delicate operation. He studies the text carefully, meticulously. He prays about the text, reflects over the meaning; no word is insignificant. Every phrase has meaning.

For us to hear God speak to us through the pages of scripture we must listen carefully and attentively. It doesn't require a great mind to read scripture, but it does require all the mind you have. Anything less and you insult God. How can you expect God to speak to you if you are not paying close attention to him? Try going out with you spouse and having an intimate conversation if his mind is on the ball game or business. It is impossible and soon you become irritated and give up. The prophet Jeremiah writes that only when you seek God with all your heart will you find him.

Second, Paul spent time in his reading of scripture *explaining* the text. To explain means to interpret the scripture. This word *explain* is closely associated with the word "opened" in Luke 24:32. The two on the road to Emmaus are stunned to discover that they have encountered the risen Christ and say, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and *opened* the Scriptures to us?" Jesus revealed the meaning of the scripture, told these two disciples what the words of the Bible meant. Later in verse 45 Jesus *opened* the minds of the disciples to the scriptures. What a joy when someone explains or opens the text to us. To have the scriptures opened means that the text becomes accessible to us—we understand what the Word of God says. Sunday after Sunday this is the work of the pastor—to explain the text, to open the scriptures.

Finally, Paul spent time *proving* the scripture. Proving does not mean that Paul argued over the accuracy of the Bible, but rather *proving* meant that Paul made the text relevant to the hearers. The imagery here is of one preparing a meal and then sitting the meal on a table for guests to enjoy. What is this scripture calling me to do? How can this passage of scripture transform my life? What change needs to take place in my life as a result of reading this text? These are the ways by which we prove scripture.

When the Bible is reasoned, explained or proved there are two possible responses: One, the Bible can be dismissed, rejected. I find that oftentimes people turn away from the Bible because they know that to believe scripture means they would have to change the way they live. The Jews at Thessalonica were angry because the message of scripture was turning their world upside down. They didn't want their world turned upside down so they rejected the word of God. How often people reject God's word because they simply don't want to change.

Secondly, there are those who say "yes" to what they read in the Bible. The Bereans "examined" the text of the Bible with great excitement. They were hungry to hear God speak, to enter into relationship with him. Consequently, his word would turn upside down their lives. They would forever be a changed people from scripture that was reasoned, explained, and proved.

I've thought much about this passage this week. Paul read the scripture in the synagogue. Most people today do not attend synagogue or church. How are they to hear scripture read if they aren't in church? Slowly I realized that we are scripture to the world. Our very lives bear the word of God to those around us. Think: People carefully watch and examine our lives, don't they? They study closely the way we live just the way we are to study God's word. Wow! But they also interpret our lives, asking themselves what our values, ethics and standards mean. And finally people in the world ask how relevant are our lifestyles, and if they make a difference in the world.

The church provides the world with a powerful scripture. There is no question that people are reading you. How clearly do people read the Word of God in you? Is your life helping to turn the world upside down? The only scripture some people will ever read is your life. Amen.