

LIVING THE LIVING WORD
Bible-Based Bible Study and Application

Grace Chapel
Orange, CA

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ACTS

1. INTRODUCTION

We began with the need to consider any subject by asking, “What has God said about this?” We have considered how God revealed Himself in creation, in his contracts with Noah and Abraham, and in the Law of Moses. We have considered the meditations of David, Solomon, the prophets and Jesus. We now come to the early church. As they interacted with the unbelieving world around them, how did members of the early church employ Scripture?

We will begin this lesson by sketching out the history in the book of Acts, but we will focus most of our attention on two speeches in the book. In Stephen’s defense before the Sanhedrin, he employs the Old Testament Scriptures to rebuke a Jewish audience. Paul, speaking to well-educated Athenian Gentiles on Mars’ Hill, employs Scripture as well, but in an entirely different situation. These two examples will help us to see how to employ Scripture for our own spiritual benefit, and in interaction with others.

2. ACTS

Pentecost and the Gentile Mission (Acts 2, 10:1-11:18, 15:1-35)

You may remember that we briefly touched on the confusion of languages at the tower of Babel. Moses recording the covenant with Noah demonstrates that translation is possible, but at Pentecost we have an even more stunning vindication of translation. When the Spirit descends on them, there is a sound “as of a mighty rushing wind,” and a crowd gathers. Since it’s festival-time, Jews have come to Jerusalem from every corner of the globe, and so the crowd is multilingual and multiethnic. The Spirit-filled believers spill out into the streets, speaking to these people, and each one hears the wonderful works of God in his own birth-language. If ever there was a vindication of the idea of translation, there it is. The wonderful works of God can be declared in any language.

The point of the event, however, is not to vindicate translation. The point is to present a sign to Israel—Gentile tongues praising God in Jerusalem. Israel was always meant to take the good news to the Gentiles, and at her better moments, she did a decent job of it.¹ God is calling her once again to fulfill her destiny.

¹ Remember the Gentiles David had a ministry with?

The sign gets even more pointed in Peter's vision, where God instructs him not to call anything God made unclean or common. Emboldened by the vision, Peter goes to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile, to preach the gospel. While he is still speaking, the Holy Spirit comes upon those who hear him, just as He came upon the Jerusalem believers at Pentecost, and the first Gentiles enter the church. The rest of the book of Acts focuses on the gospel going forth among the Gentile nations.

The final clarification comes in Acts 15, where the church declares, once and for all, that a Gentile does not need to keep the Law of Moses, but must abide by the covenant with Noah. (This makes sense, because a Gentile is not a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but is a descendant of Noah.)

Stephen before the Jews (Acts 6:8-7:60)

It is this milieu that Stephen ministers to Jews and proselytes in Jerusalem. He is a forceful witness—so effective, in fact, that his enemies falsely accuse him of crimes to shut him up. On trial before the Sanhedrin, he delivers a stunning sermon. He gives them a long history lesson, and they have no idea where he's going with it until the end. What he does is simply explain the history of Israel starting with Abraham, subtly highlighting how, beginning with Moses, the people rebelled against the prophets. By the time he shows them the point that he's making, Stephen has laid the groundwork so effectively that there is no escaping it. They are "cut to the heart." Of course, while effective preaching always induces conviction, how people respond to conviction is up to them. Sometimes it doesn't work out so happily for the preacher.

Paul before the Gentiles (Acts 17:16-34)

Called upon to explain teaching Jesus and the resurrection, Paul too uses biblical history. In this case, however, he doesn't draw on the history of Israel, but on the universal history taught for us in Genesis 1-11, that is, the history of the Gentile nations. Beginning by establishing their ignorance of God, Paul preaches against idolatry, starting from creation and moving into God's sovereign control of history. Paul shows that even without exposure to Old Testament law, the Greeks knew better than to worship idols, and challenges them to repent because there will one day be a reckoning for their behavior. Here Paul jumps right over everything from Abraham to Malachi, and presents the resurrection of Jesus as a sign of God's coming judgment.

Summary

In both cases, God's servants presented the truth to people who needed to hear it. There was no cookie-cutter approach; they were speaking to different audiences, and selected the historical material they presented accordingly. However, they have some noteworthy things in common. Both accused their respective audiences of evil; moreover, both argued that the audience knew better. Both delivered rebukes meant to call the audience to repentance, and both grounded their accusations and calls to repentance in real history.

3. THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGES

Your Daily Walk

In the coming week, consider the pattern laid out by Stephen and Paul. When you think of the things God is calling you to do, do you ground your understanding of those commands in the history that God has given to us? Try it. What historical events are relevant to your struggles this week?

Honing Your Skills (30-60 min.)

Two weeks ago, you spent some time developing applications for yourself from Psalm 139. It has now been two weeks since you first considered those applications. How are you doing with them? Have you improved in those areas? There are three key things to consider when looking at your progress in application.

First, how do you know you're doing better or worse? If you're having trouble here, it's probably because you didn't think the application through well enough initially. A clearly-defined application should be fairly easy to assess. (Sometimes it helps to check with someone else, e.g., "Honey, have I been less irritable over the last week?")

Second, in those areas where you're doing better, why are you doing better? What, specifically, is making the difference? Are you avoiding temptations that you would have faced? Are you resisting temptations you would have surrendered to? Both? Why? What are you doing or thinking differently?

Third, consider the areas where you're not doing better. What is different about your experience in these areas from the ones where you're improving? How can you change so that you will successfully follow the Lord in these areas too?

Reading (1-2 hrs.)

We're caught up to where we were, so this week we'll resume our reading in the applications section with chapters 42-45 in Hendricks.

Heavy-Duty Homework (2-3 hrs.)

In the lecture we've principally looked at Acts in terms of three characters: Peter, Stephen, and Paul. However, there are a number of other characters whose lives have lessons to teach us. This week, take a closer look at John Mark. Based on the references we have to him, try to reconstruct his life.² Who was he? What were his failures and successes? What can we learn from him?

² The list below contains all the New Testament passages that refer to John Mark by name. They are listed in chronological order, following Hoehner's chronology.

- a. Ac. 12:12-17 (Before 36)
- b. Ac. 12:25 (late 47)
- c. Ac. 13:5 (spring 48)
- d. Ac. 13:13 (summer 48)
- e. Ac. 15:36-41 (~51)
- f. Col. 4:10 (summer 58)
- g. Phm.1:24 (summer 58)
- h. 2Tim.4:11 (late 58)
- i. 1Pe.5:13 (spring 65)

4. LAST WEEK'S CHALLENGES

Your Daily Walk

Has your reflection on applying the Word deepened over the past week as you sought to understand the *internal* changes of your outward application?

Honing Your Skills (30-60 min.)

How has your memory work progressed? Does it help you to have more of the psalm memorized?

Reading (1-2 hrs.)

How has your reading in Hendricks helped your reading in Psalm 139?

Heavy-Duty Homework (2-3 hrs.)

The first thing to notice about the parables is their purpose. They are designed to reveal the truth to Jesus' disciples, and to conceal it from everyone else. Therefore, we should expect that parables will require some work to interpret, and require some basic Christian beliefs as a basis for their interpretation.

As you examine the first two parables, with their interpretations, notice that every element of the parable has an analogue in the interpretation. It has often been said, "You can't make a parable walk on all fours," but this clearly isn't true. If the element is in the parable, it means something. Also notice, however, that the big point that each parable seeks to make is pretty plain. The parables are not complicated doctrinal arguments; the doctrinal content is fairly straightforward.