



THE IMPORTANCE OF BIBLE STUDY

June 6, 2015

Sermon:
The Light Shines Through

The King's Highway

Once upon a time, a king had a great highway built for his people. To celebrate the opening of the road, the king decided to hold a contest. The challenge for his subjects was to be the best at traveling the highway, and the prize was a box of gold coins.

On the day of the contest, lots of people came to travel the highway. Some came in painted wagons and fine chariots, others on beautiful horses. They wore their finest clothes and sturdiest shoes, and they brought fancy food. Each was determined to show that he was the best at traveling the magnificent new road.

All day the people rode or drove or walked. The king and his entourage waited for them at the end of the road. As they arrived, each of the travelers, without exception, complained to the king about a pile of rocks and dirt they had come across on the new highway that almost completely blocked their way.

After most of the crowds had arrived at the end of the road, a man walking alone came to the king. He was dirty and sweaty, and he looked very tired. He said to the king, "I stopped along the way to clear a pile of rocks and dirt that was blocking the road. This chest of gold coins was underneath it. Please make sure it is returned to its rightful owner."

The king exclaimed, "You are the rightful owner!"

"Oh no," the man said, "It isn't mine. I have never had such a large amount of money."

"This gold is yours," the king said. "You won my contest. The one who travels the road best is the one who makes the road better for those who follow after."¹

We love a good story because it tells us what has happened to fellow travelers on this earth. The greatest story of all, as we know, is the Bible story. It is the only story that always matters, and it matters above all the other stories. To the extent that we know this greatest of all stories and live it, we are becoming the people God created us to be. We are learning how to be the best at traveling the road through life. We are making the road better for those who come after.

The Bible Is Our Story

Do you remember the story of the Day of Pentecost? It's a marvelous story. You recall that when the Holy Spirit was poured out and many disciples spoke in languages that they had not previously known, some of the onlookers accused them of being drunk in the daytime. The disciple Peter stood up and told a story that every one of his listeners understood. He quoted the words of the prophet Joel, the one who had prophesied centuries earlier that this infusion of the Holy Spirit's presence would one day come. Instinctively, Peter went back to the history of his people, the Jewish nation, God's own people, and retold the story of how their loving God had led them.

And then Peter said to the crowd of people that had gathered, in so many words, “Let me tell you how the story is unfolding now. Let me show you how you are living in the story of the Bible today.” We should look at exactly what Peter said. Turn to the book of Acts, chapter 2, to read what he said to them:

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it” (Acts 2:22-24).² Continuing his story, Peter quoted the words of David in Psalm 16 that predicted Jesus’ resurrection and His return to the throne in heaven. “Here we are today, friends,” Peter was saying to his listeners. “You have killed the very One who came to save us, even though the prophets told us many times that He was coming. And now He is back in heaven with His Father. He is the Messiah we have been waiting for.”

How did the people react to Peter’s story? “They were cut to heart!” the author of the book of Acts says (v. 37). The color drained from their faces. They got that cold shiver down their backs, that wrenching feeling in their gut. This is a life-changing story! And they said in response, “Brethren, what shall we do?” Help!

Here’s how Peter’s story ends. In Acts 2:38, 39, he replied to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.”

Who is the best at traveling the road through life? It is the one who makes things better for the ones who follow after.

Another early church pioneer retold the story of God’s people but with a much different outcome. The deacon in the early church named Stephen stood before the council in Jerusalem, brought up on charges of blasphemy for preaching in the name of Jesus. This is recorded in Acts 7. After Stephen was formally charged with saying in public that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the customs received through Moses, the high priest asked him, “Are these things so?” (v. 1).

You might expect that in response, Stephen would launch into a clarification of what he had actually said. That’s what some of us would want to do. We would think, *Let’s straighten out this misunderstanding, explain our position, correct the false accusers’ statements, fix these crazy people and their evil intents.*

But not Stephen. He referred back to Abraham and retold every major story of the history of God’s people. He went through the wanderings and travails of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the centuries of slavery and Israel’s deliverance; the rebellion and forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Why did he recount the story of God’s people, and in great detail, to people who already knew it? Because he had to bring them up to the present time so he could say, “Let me tell you how you yourselves are living in the Bible story.”

Here’s the significance of that situation: the members of the council who had summoned Stephen thought he was their captive. But actually they were a captive audience for Stephen’s retelling of humankind’s divinely guided story so that they could see their own place in the story. He was challenging them to decide whether or not they would make the road better for those who came after.

And then, interestingly enough, he talked about the tabernacle and how it was replaced with a permanent house of God, the temple, a place for God to live full-time with His people and guide them and bless them *if* they would accept it. It was a temple right there in their own city of Jerusalem. So Stephen ended his story in a similar way to that of Peter, bringing it up to the present day. He was fearlessly retelling the Bible story. “Here we are now,” he concluded in his storytelling to the council, “with a temple in which to worship God in faith and obedience, and we have the Holy Spirit being manifested in more open ways than we have ever seen before. Yet, you are just as rebellious and stiff-necked as our disobedient ancestors. You are still resisting the Holy Spirit. You want to kill Jesus even in His absence. This is where you are in the Bible story.”

How did this storytelling turn out? You know what happened. Acts 7 says they yelled at him and put their hands over their ears (“La, la, la, I can’t hear you!”) so that they would not hear any more of their own story. Verse 58 delivers the sad conclusion. “They cast him out of the city and stoned him.”

How do you like the power of that story? It was so strong that it got Stephen killed! The fact is, those religious leaders knew the story very well. They had begun to study the Hebrew Scriptures when they were small boys, and they had continued to study every week into adulthood. But they did not want to see their own part in the story. They were controlled by pride and selfishness, and their rebellion left enormous pain and death in its wake. How well were they traveling the road through life? What did they leave for those who followed after?

Compare that kind of dreadful disobedience with the case of Simeon, the man who met Mary and Joseph when they came to dedicate Jesus at the temple. What story was he part of? How did he travel the road? His *history* was the same as that of the religious leaders, but the way the story affected him was the complete opposite from the chief priests and other leaders. No doubt, as a young boy, Simeon learned the story of Israel. He would have known the stories of the giants of faith—Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, Esther, and the great prophets.

But Simeon understood the loving character of God from the way the larger story unfolded and from the prophecies embedded in these stories and from seeing how God acted and spoke as He dealt with the human race. The Gospel writer Luke says Simeon was “just and devout,” and “the Holy Spirit was upon him” (Luke 2:25). Simeon revered God. Knowing the story of Israel had led him to believe with all his heart that God would fulfill His promise to send the Messiah. And the Holy Spirit had honored his faith and confirmed it to him.

In his prayer over the baby Jesus, Simeon acknowledged that the Father had indeed sent the salvation that, he says in his dedication prayer, “‘You [, God,] have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel’” (Luke 2:31, 32).

When the Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon on a particular but seemingly random day that it was time to go to the temple and meet the Messiah, this devout man already knew the story. He knew it so well that he got up and went. His obedience left behind for us a testimony that makes our path better to travel on. He made the road better for those who came after.

When You Don’t Know the Story—or Don’t Want to Know

The story of the Bible doesn’t begin or end with the Israelites. At God’s direction, Moses went back and began to write down the Bible story from the beginning. How important it is to know

the beginning of the story! Think about the consequences of not knowing it, or ignoring it. These are some parts of the story that you'd miss if you didn't know the beginning:

1. *Where did we come from? And how did the world come to exist?* The Creation story is vital to us in the present era of unbelief. You've probably noticed how many people in the world simply don't believe a word of the Creation account. In fact, they think it's a made-up story, even foolish superstition.

Yet, if you don't know that God created the world in six days and created us in His image, that He is the source of life and the creator of everything, you will believe some other story. You will believe in an alternate story for yourself and for the human race. Beware the great dangers of believing in another story! Where does it lead you?

The alternate story leads you to believe that the origin of humankind is blind chance and random developments in the natural realm, in a universe that does not run on the love and wisdom of its Creator. That alternate story depicts a world where, in the end, human beings have no ultimate significance and human life is short and painful and then gone forever. That's the logical conclusion if you miss the story of Creation and accept an unworkable substitute.

If you live your life according to that alternate story, how are you doing at traveling the road through life? Is there any incentive to leave things better for the ones who come after? Surely not.

Another thing you miss if you don't know or choose to ignore the beginning of the human story is:

2. *Where did evil come from? How did the world get into such terrible shape?* Without the story of Lucifer and the fall of one-third of the angels, we have no idea where evil came from. We don't have the perspective we need of the spiritual war going on in the universe between God and Satan. We don't know the supreme importance of what happened when Adam and Eve disobeyed God. And without knowing the clear prediction of God recorded in Genesis 3 that He will save human beings at the cost of His own Son's life, we would not know that the present state of the world can be explained by God's commitment to choice.

When you miss that part of the story, you may find yourself believing one or more of these terrible ideas:

- Evil is always present, so we just have to deal with it. That's called dualism, and it is not the truth. Elsewhere in the Bible story we learn that evil will come to an end because of Jesus. Evil is not an everlasting reality. It will be destroyed.

Or you might believe this:

- God is to blame for the evil in the world. That ignores Satan's role in the original rebellion, his tempting of Eve and Adam, and the choice they made to disobey. Also, it simply restates Satan's original false accusation against God.

Here's another idea that traps some people who miss the beginning of the Bible story:

- I try hard to be good. I'm a pretty good person. We know from the very beginning of our story that the entire human race became sinful when Adam and Eve sinned, and no one is "pretty good" by any measure. For anyone to say they're a pretty good person has no meaning, since every single person who ever lived is completely sinful.

This seemingly tragic reality leads to another part of the beginning of the Bible story that some people miss:

3. *Why is God allowing the story of humankind to go in the direction that it's going?* If you read and study the history written by human historians, you will discover thousands of years of war, persecution, suffering, disease, and every other kind of evil and human selfishness

imaginable. You'd be justified in wondering why God is allowing that kind of story to develop. But don't miss the revelations God made at the very beginning of the story.

First of all, by rejecting God, human beings set in motion their own eternal death. That's the story of Genesis 3. Our loving God did not immediately destroy the ones who chose to oppose or reject Him. Instead, He made two promises. One was that He would restore the choice to live with Him eternally, and the other was that He would send Jesus to take the penalty of eternal death on Himself in our place. If you don't know that part of the story, the later developments in this world don't make much sense, and all of the evil in the world today makes no sense at all. But when we know the beginning of the story well, we understand why something so undesirable as the present condition of the world is actually an inevitable consequence of our choices, and the story must be completed in just this way from where it began.

We could say that the time of Jesus living on this earth and His death and resurrection are the middle of the Bible story, but that era is really the turning point, the moment at which it becomes clear how the story will end. So it's also right to say that His death and resurrection are the climax of the story. After Jesus successfully restored the eternal life option for humanity, the major action was over. This part of the story cannot be missed because if you don't know the story of how Jesus fulfilled His Father's promise, you don't know what your options are. Did the problem of eternal death for human beings get solved, or did it not? You must find out as much as you can about this part of the story.

What about the ending? We return to the beginning of the Bible story to discover the first promise about the ending. God the Father promised that the head of the serpent would be crushed. All sin and evil and death would be eliminated. The prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, along with hundreds of references in other parts of the Bible, make it very clear to us that Jesus will come back to this earth when it is time to rescue us from this sinful world. Then, a thousand years after we go to heaven, God will have a final confrontation with His accusers and destroy them forever. Death will be no more. The sad story of sinful earth will be finished.

Finally, there is the issue of how the story will end for you. That's one amazing aspect of the Bible story, among many. *The end of your story is up to you.* You get to choose the ending. Every person who ever lived gets to choose the ending. How do you know what ending to choose if you don't know the whole story? You must know the whole story.

The Person You Become Through the Bible Story

In a book called *Mystery on the Desert*, author Maria Reiche describes some strange lines marked into the ground by a people called the Nazca in the flat plain areas of Peru. For a long time, people assumed that the lines marked an ancient irrigation system. Then in 1939, Dr. Paul Kosok of Long Island University flew over that part of Peru in an airplane. He discovered that the lines were not irrigation ditches but were actually enormous drawings of birds, insects, and animals. Nobody could make sense of the lines until someone got high enough to see the big picture.³

You know what happens to you when you study the Bible? The more parts of the story you get to know well, the more of the entire story you can see.

The wonderful gift we have received in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the perspective of The Great Controversy, which is the central theme of the human story. The entire story begins before the Creation and continues on after the re-Creation. It is the big picture that we cannot do without.

Some of you may say, “I know this story well.” Others of you may be near the beginning of your journey and are just now learning the big-picture story.

Here is a truth that applies to all of us today. God the Father drew us to be here right now. As John records Jesus saying to His disciples, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44). God the Father came to you and spoke to you through the Holy Spirit, drawing you to Him. You said yes to His knock at your heart’s door. You opened it and let Him in. And then began the wonderful development of a relationship between Your Creator God and you.

Please take the best relationship advice I can give you. Get to know God better and better by studying the Bible story from beginning to end. Take every opportunity. Gather the rich knowledge that Sabbath School gives you. Learn from fellow Christians what God has done in their lives as you engage in discussion with them. Allow the Holy Spirit to show you where you are in the Bible story today.

When you think about it, we are not really trying to win a contest. We are not trying to beat others in a competition, not trying to look good to God. But there is such a thing as leaving things better for the ones who come after. The best way to do it is to clear out the rocks and dirt from your mind and discover the gold in the Scriptures. Study the wonderful story of the Bible.

¹ Adapted from Shahid Riaz, compiler, *Wisdom Pearls* (self-published online), p. 98, <http://www.slideshare.net/arti09/wisdom-pearls-short-inspiring-stories>.

² Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural references are from the *New King James Version of the Bible*.

³ Craig Brian Larsen and Phylis Ten Elshof, *1001 Illustrations That Connect* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008), p. 22.