

JESUS'S BIBLE BLITZ

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

During the month of January 1981, Nancy and I and our fellow second-year seminary classmates took a three-and-a-half week course called “Introduction to the English Bible.” Dr. Elizabeth Achtemeier was our professor. The format and expectations of the class were pretty straightforward. Each day we were assigned large chunks of the Bible to read, beginning with Genesis 1:1. By the end of the course we had read every word in the English Bible through Revelation 22:21. Each day we took a multiple-choice test on the required reading. Then Dr. Achtemeier would present an almost two-hour lecture on the overarching biblical and theological themes of the sections of the Bible we had read the night before. The course was grueling, intimidating, and fascinating. Dr. Achtemeier helped us see how the entire message of the Bible holds together through the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. Also, the course prepared us to take the denomination’s standardized Bible Content Exam at the beginning of February, a one hundred multiple-choice question exam that covered the entire Bible. A passing grade on the exam was one of the requirements to be ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). We affectionately called Dr. Elizabeth Achtemeier’s “Introduction to the English Bible” class “Betty’s Bible Blitz.”

I don’t know how much “our hearts were burning within us while she talked with us and opened the Scriptures to us” that January term, but I know there was a lot of heartburn as we read lengthy passages of scripture each night, took numerous exams, and anticipated the daunting Bible Content Exam in early February!

As challenging and memorable as “Betty’s Bible Blitz” remains forty-one years later, it kind of pales in comparison to Jesus’s Bible Blitz on the Road to Emmaus on Easter Sunday afternoon 2,000 years ago. How long do you suppose the walk that Cleopas and his companion shared with the stranger lasted? Maybe not very long – it seems already to be getting on into the afternoon and early evening. Let’s say Cleopas and his companion had already been walking at a rate of about 2.5 – 3 miles per hour. They would have been very close to Emmaus by the time Jesus showed up. And yet, in that short amount of time, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.” (Luke 24:27)

That means Jesus would have covered Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, along with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. He wouldn’t have been teaching them new content. After all, Cleopas and his companion probably would have known the scriptures by heart. Instead, Jesus made

their hearts burn within them because he helped them understand the scriptures and Jesus in a new light, even before their eyes were opened and they recognized him in the breaking of the bread.

It's no wonder their hearts burned within them while he was opening the scriptures to them on the road. After all, over in Matthew's gospel, in Jesus's great Sermon on the Mount, he repeatedly says, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times. . . but I say to you . . ." Matthew's concluding statement about Jesus's sermon says, "Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them **as one having authority**, and not as their scribes. In John's gospel, when the Pharisees reject Jesus's testimony as invalid, because he testifies about himself, Jesus answers them, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I have come from or where I am going . . . In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf." (John 8:13-14, 17-18)

In other words, when he taught and opened the scriptures to Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus, Jesus didn't have to footnote and cross-reference and list his citations, as I do in my sermons. As he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures, the Word of God, he **was** the Word of God, who in the beginning was with God and was God (John 1:1) "And the Word of God became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) And the Word of God became flesh and **lives** among us and continues to interpret to us the things about himself in all the scriptures.

Let's have a mini "Bible Blitz" this morning. I began my September 2019 article for The Duplin Times by asking, "Which of the following phrases are found in the Bible?" Then I listed these ten statements. What do you think? 1. God moves in a mysterious way. (Nope, from a 1774 hymn by William Cowper) 2. Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything. (Yep, Colossians 3:22) 3. Money is the root of all evil. (Close, but no, a mistaken quotation of 1 Timothy 6:10, which says, "For **the love of money** is a root of all kinds of evil.") 4. Cleanliness is next to godliness. (No, first recorded in a 1778 sermon by John Wesley.) 5. This too shall pass. (It's not in the Bible, but Coach Mike Ditka cited it as a scripture verse in a news conference when he was fired as the head coach of the Chicago Bear in 1993.) 6. God helps those who help themselves. (Nope, it's the moral of one of Aesop's fables. A farmer prays to Hercules to help him get his wagon unstuck from the mud. Hercules gives him advice about what to do. The moral of the story: The gods help them that help themselves.) 7. Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who reverts to his folly. (Surprisingly, yes, Proverbs 26:11) 8. Search others for their virtues, thyself for thy vices. and 9. He that would live in peace and at ease must not speak all he knows, nor judge all he sees. (Nope, these two come from Poor Richard's Almanac by Benjamin Franklin.) 10. Grief can take care of itself; but to get the full value of a joy you must have someone to divide it with. (Although this sounds like something from the book of Proverbs or Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, it is actually a quotation from Mark Twain.)

They all sound as if they could come from the Bible, don't they? It's certainly important to know Bible content, but it's even more important to see how the entire

message of the Bible holds together and points to Jesus Christ, who is right there with us when we read and hear and ponder and search and open ourselves to the wonder of God's Word.

Twenty years ago, I attended a preaching conference in Atlanta. One of the presenters gave some tips about engaging the congregation in the study of God's Word and having them contribute to your preaching. He suggested sending an email invitation to the congregation and asking for feedback following Sunday's sermon. That sounded like a great idea to me, so I tried it here for a couple of weeks – and got zero responses! Then I had a different idea – what if the weekly Bible study was about the sermon text for the following Sunday and folks were invited to sit together in God's Word and share what the Word meant to them? And the Wednesday morning Bible study was born and continues to this day. During the pandemic, our Monday night Zoom Bible study was added.

After I read the biblical text on Monday night or Wednesday morning, I ask open-ended questions – "What do you hear in this story? What captures your attention? What do you want to ask about or talk about?" and, as they say, "we're off to the races." The weekly Bible studies are a great discipline for me. I have a responsibility to come prepared with my study and thoughts. The folks who join me are gracious and generous in sharing their thoughts with me, and they all go in the sermon pot to be mixed, stirred, and sorted out. I imagine we all learn some details and information each week about the Bible verses, but more important than that, we talk about what God's Word means to us and for us, right here, right now. We are reminded that God's Word is the living Word, because our Lord is the living Lord. While I promise the folks in Bible study that I take their thoughts and suggestions seriously, I make no guarantees that the Sunday sermon will always reflect what we talked about on Monday night or Wednesday morning. So, from time to time, I'll hear comments at the narthex door such as, "Well, that wasn't anything like what we talked about on Wednesday" or "I wondered how you were going to tie everything together this week" or "It really helps me to read the Bible with other people and talk about it before I come to worship on Sunday and hear the sermon." So, here's my commercial: If you're not already part of the Monday night Zoom Bible study or the Wednesday morning in person and Zoom Bible study, I would love to have you join us. Your presence, thoughts, questions, and comments will be welcomed and will undoubtedly enrich our conversation. I also think your faith can be enriched and the life of our congregation can be nurtured and strengthened as you listen for God's Word in your life and share what you hear with your fellow believers.

In her book, *Life Together in Christ*, that we are using for our Lenten study, Ruth Haley Barton shares an experience she had on a retreat when her friend led an exercise called "Finding Ourselves in the Story." Her friend told the group, "Finding our place in the context of the larger redemption story is an important point of integration as we find ourselves named, revealed and known in the pages of Scripture." The participants were asked to reflect on these questions as they listened for God's Word: "Where is the place in Scripture where you find yourself exclaiming, 'My story is being told here!?' Where among the biblical characters have you found yourself named, understood and received? What are the events and life circumstances that have shaped you most

profoundly, and how does finding that part of your own story in His-story foster a reverent awareness that God is authoring your life?”¹ I can only imagine Cleopas and his companion themselves answering those same kinds of questions as Jesus opened the scriptures to them on the Emmaus Road.

As advertised, I want to read today’s gospel lesson from Luke 24:13-35 now. This is an abbreviated version of an ancient form of Bible study called *Lectio divina*, which means “divine or sacred reading.” It is described as “an approach to reading Scripture that sets us up to encounter the Living Word speaking to us in and through Scripture in this present moment.”² Our session often uses *Lectio divina* in our worship and Bible studies at our monthly meetings. Typically, the Bible passage is read four different times, but I’m only going to read the story once this morning. I’ve asked Bill not to put the words to the passage on the screen today, and I encourage you not to follow along in the pew Bible. Instead, listen and make yourself open and available to God through the Word read. As I read the Emmaus Road story from the New International Version of the Bible, I invite you to listen for the word or the phrase that strikes you, jumps out at you, speaks to you in a new way, or maybe causes you to say, “My story is being told here!” I invite you to take that word or phrase with you through the coming week as you continue your Lenten journey. How might that word or phrase, and the story itself, make your heart burn within you this week and help you recognize the risen Lord who walks this path with you?

I invite you to listen for the Word of God.

13 Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. 14 They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. 15 As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; 16 but they were kept from recognizing him.

17 He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?” They stood still, their faces downcast. 18 One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

19 “What things?” he asked. “About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. 20 The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; 21 but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. 22 In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning 23 but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. 24 Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.”

25 He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

28 As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. 29 But they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them.

30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. 32 They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

33 They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together 34 and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” 35 Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

Let us pray: O Lord, help us to know that we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Help us to taste your Word and find that it is sweeter than honey to our mouths. As we meet the risen Lord, help us to know that we are a part of your ongoing story of salvation. Amen.

NOTES

¹Ruth Haley Barton, *Life Together in Christ: Experiencing Transformation in Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2014), 114.

²Ibid., p. 124.