

Renewing a Vision for Shoreline Part 1 - Established by God

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[0:00] The scripture passage for today is Ezekiel 37, 1-14. At the conclusion of the reading, I will declare, this is the word of the Lord.

And the church, in joyful response to his revelation given to us, will together say, thanks be to God. The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley.

It was full of bones. And he led me around among them. And behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley. And behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, Son of man, can these bones live?

And I answered, O Lord God, you know. Then he said to me, Prophecy over these bones and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones, Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.

And I will lay sinews upon you, and cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live. And you shall know that I am the Lord. So I prophesied as I was commanded.

[1:02] And as I prophesied, there was a sound. And behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them.

But there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, Prophecy to the breath. Prophecy, Son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God, Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain that they may live.

So I prophesied as he commanded me. And the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. Then he said to me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel.

Behold, they say, Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost. We are indeed cut off. Therefore prophecy and say to them, Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I will open your graves and raise you up from your graves, O my people, and I will bring you into the land of Israel.

And you shall know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, O my people. And I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live. And I will place you in your own land.

[2:02] Then you shall know that I am the Lord. I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord. This is the word of the Lord. Heavenly Father, God, this amazing vision that you gave to Ezekiel by the waters of Babylon, Father, we pray that you would speak to us now by your word.

God, that you would breathe out your Holy Spirit upon us. God, call forth life in the hearts that are here. God, awaken faith among us.

And as we sang as a congregation earlier, would you lead us on, O King Eternal. God, you are truly the King, immortal, invisible, God-only wise. Would you lead us as a church, as families, as individuals, for your glory, for our good, we pray.

In Jesus' name, amen. Good morning, Shoreline. Good morning. My name's Mike. I'm one of the pastors here, and so glad that we can worship together this morning.

You know, when the Navy wants a new submarine from an electric boat, this is oversimplifying things here, but they provide their desired design requirements, their specs, right?

[3:23] And E.B.'s job then is to design, build, and deliver a submarine that meets those requirements, right? That the specs from the Navy are the foundation, and then E.B. must work out practically what that will actually look like.

Now, in many ways, this is a helpful analogy for understanding why we need to have a vision as a church. Now, when you hear the word vision, you might immediately think, that's not biblical. That's just corporate America's influence on the church. And I understand why you think that, because like modern companies, many churches have sought in their vision statements, their mission statements, to offer something new or clever or catchy.

But I want you to instead to think about the analogy that I just offered. Navy specs worked out practically by the shipbuilder. This is the kind of vision that we need as a church, a vision derived from the authoritative word of the Lord, practically worked out in our place, in our time.

Now, that's basically what Paul was doing all throughout 1 Corinthians, which we studied as a church all throughout this year. Paul makes a beeline in every topic. He makes a beeline for the gospel of Jesus Christ, the theological foundation, and then he demonstrates a practical outworking of the gospel in the Corinthian church life and culture.

[4:49] As we saw with Corinth, when we either don't know or we drift from the vision, then we're in danger of being ineffective as a church, or worse, actually opposing the very mission that God has called us to.

We need a biblical vision as a church. You know, by God's grace, Shoreline is about to celebrate 10 years of public ministry in just a couple weeks.

Yeah, it's really exciting. I hope that you'll stay after church in two weeks to celebrate with us. But in light of that, it's a fitting time for us to step back and to put before us a renewed vision for this church.

You know, throughout the year, you've been getting the elders' vision a bit piecemeal. You know, as we've looked at 1 Corinthians, we've considered what it looks like to be a healthy church, what it looks like to display Christ in the gospel more fully.

But it's helpful for that vision to be laid out more comprehensively. And so to that end, we are beginning today a four-part sermon series, *Renewing a Vision for Shoreline*.

[5:59] *Renewing a Vision for Shoreline*. Now, as you're going to hear later, in this first week, this church is committed as its main diet to expositional preaching. We're going to talk about that.

You know, working through whole books of the Bible, preaching topically is not the norm here. However, topical sermons can be helpful at times. And so here we are. We're going to preach a topical sermon series over these next four weeks.

And our goal, my goal, is to clearly lay out for you all the elders' vision for Shoreline. So that is the theological foundation given to us by God, and then its practical outworking in the life of the church. Now, I want to say, if you're new to Shoreline, welcome. In many ways, this is an excellent time for you to join us, because you're going to see, Lord willing, what our church is all about.

And this can help you decide whether the Lord is leading you to stay here, and not just join, but to commit to this local body. And at the same time, these sermons are especially for the members of this church.

[7:02] And this is kind of like a family chat in many ways. One that we began at our congregational meeting on September 28th, and we're going to be expounding over these next four weeks on what we started to talk about then.

And since that meeting, so I gave the members that were there, whoever was there, I gave a handout of our vision at a high level. We've been tweaking that over the last several weeks. So there are, hopefully you guys all got papers.

If you don't have these, there should be some more on the back table. What you're going to see here is that things look a little bit different than it did, you know, just a handful of weeks ago.

And one of those key differences is that we've added a whole fourth area, okay? This proceeds and leads to the other three areas of exalt, edify, expand, which are going to be walking through the next three weeks.

So the first one we're covering today is that we have been, as individuals, but especially as a church, we have been established by God. That's the title of today's sermon, established by God. [8:04] And that is that we exist by the gracious will of God, who is the great initiator of creation and redemption. And that's the big point of today's sermon, the first portion of our vision.

We exist by the gracious will of God, who is the great initiator of creation and redemption. Now today, in all four weeks, we're going to be flipping all over the Bible.

So have a copy of God's Word in front of you. If you don't have a copy, there's Bibles on the back table. Feel free to keep one of those. And everyone, please turn to the very first page of Scripture. That's where we're going to start. Genesis chapter 1. Now, the first thing we're going to do today, we're going to survey Scripture to see this principle, how we have been established by God, how we exist by His gracious will.

And then we're going to look at four vision principles flowing out of this, along with the practical outworking of each of those. So first, surveying the big picture of Scripture.

[9:07] Surveying the big picture in Scripture. Here are, look in your Bibles there, Genesis chapter 1, here are the very first words of Scripture. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, let there be light.

And there was light. And God saw the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light day and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning the first day.

Don't worry, we're not going to read the entire Word of God today. The first thing we see here is that creation was established by God's will.

What we find here in the beginning is God and God alone. preceding history, preceding the universe as we know it, preceding human life is life itself, the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[10:13] And it's out of God's creative power, out of His overflowing goodness, that He brought forth the universe, the earth, the plants, and the animals, and humanity into existence.

And how did He do it? How did He do it? He spoke by His Word. And I could drum it. If you read Genesis 1, like a drumbeat, we read, and God said, and it was so.

And God said, and it was so. He spoke and stars and planets and oceans and fish and animals and everything came into being.

Last of all, the crowning beauty of His creation, humanity, whom He made in His image and likeness. Paul says of Christ in Colossians 1.16, for by Him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities.

All things were created through Him and for Him. Creation was established by the will of God as He spoke His Word and breathed out His Spirit.

[11:22] Now, if Christ hasn't returned yet, I hope He does, but if He hasn't yet, we're, Lord willing, going to be starting a sermon series through Genesis in the new year. And we're going to see how many foundational truths are laid out in the first 11 chapters as man proceeds to sin and the curse and death spread throughout the world in judgment.

And yet, right beside God's judgment is His mysterious mercy. This mercy, God then focuses on one man, Abraham, and his family.

in Genesis chapter 12. And that sets in motion the rest of the redemptive story of Scripture. So this leads me to the second point. Israel was established by God's will.

You turn to Genesis chapter 12 in your Bibles, just flip a few pages forward, Genesis 12. God promises to Abraham, look at verses 2 and 3.

He says, And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

[12:34] Now the rest of the book of Genesis describes how this very promise to Abraham begins to come to pass through Abraham's line from him

to Isaac to Jacob to Jacob's 12 sons who then become the 12 tribes of Israel.

And then in Exodus we find that even amidst slavery and bondage in Egypt, God continues to multiply them greatly. He is fulfilling his covenant promises to them.

And then he raises up Moses to deliver Israel from Egypt and on the other side of the Red Sea having defeated Pharaoh and his mighty army by God's mighty hand and outstretched arm.

God says these words to Israel, Exodus 19. You yourselves have seen, God says, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples for all the earth is mine and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

[13:37] Israel was established by God's will. You know, I'm reading through Deuteronomy right now and God tells Israel it's not because you were more righteous than them, it's because I chose you. It's because I loved you.

That's why God chose Israel. Not because of them, because of him. Israel was established by the will of God. God is the one who graciously acted to choose Abraham, to make him into a great nation, to rescue them from Egypt.

God acted to reveal himself to Israel, to give them his law, to separate them from the pagan nations, to be holy as he is holy. Creation and then Israel were established by the will of God as he spoke his word and breathed out his spirit.

Of course, if you know the Old Testament, you know how the story goes. Creation, fall, Israel, fail. All right? Not a failure on God's part, no, no, no, no. A failure on Israel's part to fulfill her covenant obligations.

You know, over and over again, Israel fails to be the holy nation that God desires her to be. God raises up judges to rescue Israel, to call her back, but she wanders off again into sin.

[14:45] God sends prophet after prophet to expose Israel's sin, to call her to repentance and faith with the offer of forgiveness and mercy extended, but she continues in rebellion.

And so in judgment, God raises up nations, Assyria, to take away the northern kingdom, Babylon, who conquers the southern kingdom of Israel and carries the people off into exile.

And it's right there in Babylon, in exile, that God speaks to his prophet Ezekiel, giving him that majestic vision of the valley of dry bones that Holland read for us earlier.

God would, once again, establish his people. What we see in that vision is that by the power of his word and his spirit, he would raise up dead dry bones to become an exceedingly great army of his holy ones.

A people with a heart of flesh instead of a heart of stone with the spirit of God living inside of them, causing them to know God and to walk in his ways.

[15:49] And you know, the people of Israel, they return to Jerusalem, they rebuild the walls and the temple, but it's not what it once was. And hundreds of years go by, the new covenant promises remain unfulfilled, and it seems that God has gone silent.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons.

Galatians 4, 4 and 5. Yes, Jesus Christ, the word of God made flesh, the son of God, he comes and dwells among mankind, he reveals the glory of God to us, and by the gracious will of God, his boundless love, Christ lays down his life upon the cross, he becomes the once for all sacrifice that we needed for our sins.

And then he rises again to indestructible life, and he ascends back to the Father's right hand in glory. It is through Jesus Christ that the prophetic promises of Ezekiel and of all the Old Testament find their fulfillment.

And we see that the church, the church is established by the will of God. In other words, God has established his new covenant people, a living army of once dead dry bones, the church, through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[17:21] Christ, all those who believe in Jesus' name are forgiven of their sins, are reconciled to God, are given the righteousness of Christ that we could never have on our own.

They're adopted into God's family forever. And God is the great initiator of this redemptive plan. God is the one who chose not of anything of our own to lavish his grace upon us, by sending Christ to die in our place.

God is the one who graciously transforms our hearts by his spirit so that we might respond in faith and repentance and receive salvation. God is the one who makes us holy as he is holy and unites us together in Christ.

The church is established by the will of God as the word of Christ, the gospel, and the spirit go forth and do their work. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, Titus 3, 4, and 5.

The church is established by the will of God as he speaks his word and breathes out his spirit. And friends, as all things have come to pass, so also eternity will unfold according to God's will.

[18:55] And we're not going to dwell here today. You can go back and listen to the sermon preached from 1 Corinthians 15, 20-28 for more on that glorious reality. Eternity is going to unfold according to God's gracious and sovereign will.

So what we see from the beginning to end of Scripture is that we exist by the gracious will of God who is the great initiator of creation and redemption.

Now if you're here and you have not responded to the gospel by repenting of your sin and turning to Christ by faith, consider how God is even right now, even right now, revealing himself to you through his word, through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He is calling you to himself this very moment. Today, today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart. Eternal life and salvation is offered to you freely because of the blood of Christ.

Receive him this morning. Receive him this morning. We exist by the gracious will of God who is the great initiator of creation and redemption.

[20:05] Now this is where a biblical vision for the local church must begin. Right here with God and what he has done. And this has implications for us as a body.

So there are now four key vision principles that we believe are derived from this truth that we have been established by God. Now these are attributes that we seek to be increasingly characterized by as a church.

We have not arrived. Okay? We will never have arrived until Christ comes and takes us to himself and makes us perfectly holy. Okay? But these are things we're seeking to be characterized by. In other words, if someone new comes to Shoreline and spends some time with us, we want them to be able to describe us in these ways. And so if you flip the sheet over to the back of the handouts, here is the first one.

It's flowing right out of what we've talked about so far. We seek to be a church submitted to God's word. Submitted to God's word.

[21:09] We've just seen that from beginning to end, it is God's breathed out word that proceeds and establishes his people. The spirit imparts life through his word.

Now this is true not only in conversion, you know, sinners coming to faith in Christ for the first time, it's also true in sanctification. Saints increasingly putting off the old self and putting on the new self created after the likeness of God and true righteousness and holiness.

Ephesians 4.12. We do that by the spirit through the word. By the spirit through the word. Jesus replied to Satan in Matthew 4.4, man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

It's quoting Deuteronomy 8. And as he prayed to the father in his high priestly prayer in John 17.17, Jesus said, sanctify them in your truth. Your word is truth.

We are made alive in Christ and we grow in Christ's likeness by the spirit through the word. There's so many verses could be consulted to read in 4 at this point.

[22:20] A bunch of them are listed on those handouts, but I'm just going to read one more passage. 2 Timothy 3.15-17. Paul tells Timothy that the sacred writings, the scriptures, are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. So in light of all this, we seek as a church to be submitted to God's word. That is, we seek to be a church submitted to the whole counsel of God's word because it is both the source and authority of our lives.

So how does this vision work out practically in the life of the church? Now just as an aside here, the things on the page are not everything. There's a lot more ways that this could work itself out practically and I hope that you guys take this home and think about this yourselves and talk in your community groups about these things.

These are some of the key areas that we think that this principle works out practically. Here's the first one. Sound doctrine. Sound doctrine. Since God's word is the source and authority of our lives, we must be sure to uphold it, to guard it, to protect it.

[23:44] And you know, one of the ways that Christians have done that historically is by summarizing the Bible's most important teachings. That's what doctrine is. It's summarizing the teachings of the word and doing that in creeds or confessions or catechisms.

And so we hold to a doctrinal statement, a statement of faith, which aims to contain those most important teachings. It helps us to guard the word of God which has been entrusted to us. The word creates the church and the church guards the word. The word creates the church by the spirit. The word creates the church. The church guards the word.

Sound doctrine, Bobby Jameson writes, leads to sound faith, sound hearts, and sound consciences. And these become the fountain from which flows an entire life that is pleasing to God. Sound doctrine. Here's the second thing. Word-centered worship. Word-centered worship and gathered worship. This time right here, the word must permeate every aspect of what we do.

[24:47] It is God's clearest revelation to us because it is through the spirit. I'm sorry, by the spirit. The spirit uses the word to save us, to sanctify us.

So from the beginning to the end of our services, we speak the word, we sing the word, we pray the word, we preach the word. And also, we structured the service so that the preaching of the word is the central element.

That's not because of the person up here speaking. That's because of the word that we're trying to bring to you guys. It's God's word. And so the sermon itself is actually meant to model the reality of our relationship to God.

He speaks, we listen and apply. That's what's going on here. This is not a very common mode of communication anymore for people who sit down and listen for 45 minutes. We do that because this is the word of the Lord that we want to listen to and apply.

It's God's word. And so, you know, my job, the preacher, whoever's up here, the preacher must work hard to rightly understand what God is speaking through his word so that he can then preach it authoritatively for the church to hear and respond.

[26:01] But it's not my authority, it's God's authority. His authority. And this leads to something that kind of falls under this. We are committed here to expositional preaching.

Now, this is, so expositional preaching, it's letting the shape and emphasis of the text be represented in the shape and emphasis of the sermon.

In other words, it's seeking to draw out of the text the message that the Holy Spirit put there and not put into the text what the preacher thinks might be there. A commitment to expositional preaching is a commitment to the voice of God, not the voice of men.

It's the voice of God. And the best way to do this, we believe, is by preaching through whole books of the Bible so that we can see everything in its proper context that God gave to us when he gave us these books of the Bible.

And, you know, like I said earlier, there is a time and a place for topical preaching. We need systematic theology and there's a time and a place to preach topically like I'm doing now, but even in topical preaching, the preacher must do the exegetical work, the labor in the word to uncover the God-given meaning of each passage.

[27:20] Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4.2, we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word. God, help us not to tamper with his word.

Okay, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Word-centered discipling. Being submitted to God's word means that all of our discipling efforts must have his word at center.

So, in Shoreline Kids, okay, we're not babysitting over there. We're discipling children with the truth of God's word. That's the main course over there. It's the word of God. And maybe not in the ones and twos.

I'm not sure if they're there, but definitely in the threes and the fours and up. God's word is the center of what they're doing over there. In Shoreline Youth, in community groups, God's word is at center in our counseling.

Whether that's formal counseling or informal, we seek to wield the wisdom of the word and bring that to bear on real life circumstances. Word-centered discipling.

[28:21] Here's the last one we're going to mention in this category here. Equipping the saints to handle the word. Okay, as elders, we want to be equipping the saints, you all, to rightly handle the word of God for yourselves.

And so this happens through our preaching and teaching. We're trying to model that. We also hope to hold equipping classes in the future on how to study the word of God. We do this in one-on-one times.

We want to equip the saints to handle the word. The Bible says that God's word is seed to bring forth life. It's bread to nourish.

It's honey to sweeten our souls. It's gold to be desired. It's a lamp to light our way. It's fire to refine us. The word is the eternal revelation of God that saves and sanctifies.

We seek to be a church submitted to that word. Here's the second thing. Dependent on the spirit. We seek to be a church that lives in total dependence upon the Holy Spirit.

[29:22] Apart from whose presence and power no spiritual life or growth takes place. In light of the fact that it's the spirit through the word that brings life and growth.

Church, that means, listen to this, that means all of our efforts to evangelize the lost, to see conversions, to root out sin and grow in spiritual maturity, they are futile apart from God's spirit. Just worthless if God's spirit isn't in it. This theological truth, church, it means that our programs, our tactics, our strategies, they do not ultimately bear fruit for God.

It's God that bears fruit. God bears fruit. The goals that we are striving after as a church, all of the goals that we are actually aiming for as a church body are supernatural, spiritual goals that we can't actually bring about.

How's that for your company's mission statement, right? Like, we can't achieve the things we're setting after. That's why the church is not like the world. We're after things that only God can do by his spirit.

[30:25] Now, this doesn't mean, listen to this, this doesn't mean we won't employ programs and strategies and tactics. It means that as we do, we do so in full reliance on the Holy Spirit and not our methods.

We seek again and again to be empowered by him, to be filled by him, for him to pour himself out. We understand that God uses servants to plant and to water.

This is his plan. He uses servants to plant and water, but he's the one that gives the growth.

Kingdom of God, Jesus says, is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day and the seed sprouts and grows.

He knows not how. The farmer does his work. The growth comes from the Lord. That's from Mark 4, 26 and 27. It's like a farmer. It's also like sailing.

You can design the most hydrodynamic hull. You can dispatch the most savvy crew of Coast Guard cadets or whoever. If there's no wind, and I'm not a sailor, but I understand that if there's zero wind, are you going anywhere at Coast Guard, folks, without any wind at all?

[31:36] Okay, Blayden says no. I trust Blayden. If there's no wind, you're not going anywhere. The Holy Spirit, he is the life-giving wind that animates and empowers the church. Okay, so how does this vision work itself out practically in the life of the church?

Now, this is one of those things that it ought to permeate everything, everything that we do, but I do want to give at least a few practical examples, but you can think of like a million more.

Okay, spirit dependence in every area in preaching. Okay, we already talked about the preacher must labor to diligently handle the Word of God, 2 Timothy 2.15, but he has no power to affect change in people's hearts.

No power. Only the Spirit does. And so, the preacher must earnestly pray before, during, and after he preaches that the Spirit would pour himself out and bring transformation through his sword, which is the Word.

Kids and youth ministry. Okay, look, we might be able to attract the youth by having really cool events, but really cool events do not bring of themselves lasting fruit, right?

[32:46] Kids and the youth, they need to hear the Word. They need to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They need to encounter the living God. And the Spirit uses the Word to awaken faith, to bring life to the dead.

And so, the spotlight in our kids' ministries, in our youth ministries, it needs to be on God and His Word and not, you know, our cool vibes or our creativity. Okay, just one more practical example. In counseling. Okay, this is sort of a theology of heart change here. And this is foundational for how we think about counseling one another. We can borrow tactics from secular psychology and perhaps see behavioral changes, right?

But those changes will never be at the heart level. Okay, God is after our hearts and He's the one that changes hearts. And so, in our counseling, again, we wield the wisdom of the Word and total reliance on the Spirit to do His work of sanctification.

Okay, so when you boil it all down, really, dependence on the Spirit, it works itself out in devotion to the Word and devotion to prayer. That's really what it is. Now, we talked about devotion to the Word and we're going to talk about devotion to prayer later.

[33:57] Jesus said in John 16, verse 7, it would be to His disciples' advantage that He go away because then He would send the Helper, the Holy Spirit, to be with them forever.

And this is exactly what Christ did at Pentecost. He poured out the Holy Spirit from on high to fill the saints, to empower them for mission and for ministry. The church advances through Spirit-filled gospel-preaching believers.

The church advances through Spirit-filled gospel-preaching believers. We'll definitely be coming back to that later in the vision. We seek to be here dependent on the Spirit. And it's the gospel now that we turn.

So thirdly, we seek to be centered on the gospel. If we have already said that we seek to be submitted to the word, then why go and add this?

Centered on the gospel. We seek to be centered on the gospel because the gospel of Jesus Christ is the climax of God's word. It's a climax of the revelation of God to us.

[35:04] It is power unto salvation and it is the pattern for the Christian life. That's why we seek to be centered on the gospel. It is possible for a church to be deeply committed to God's word and still miss the big picture.

This is what happened in Israel at the time of Christ. Christ rebuked the scribes and Pharisees. He said to them, you blind guides straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel.

And this can happen today as well. Maybe you've been at a church like this that takes seriously the letter of the word but misses the heart of the gospel. We want to be a church that does both.

We want to take seriously the letter of the word while applying that within the economy of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so we want to keep central the things that are central and not wield God's word in a legalistic manner.

A really simple way to think about the Bible is that the Old Testament is promises made and the New Testament is promises kept. It's through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[36:14] The good news about what God has done in Christ to save sinners by grace, it's through that gospel that God's covenant promises of old have been and are being fulfilled.

All the promises of God find their yes in Christ. 2 Corinthians 1.20 Paul speaks of the gospel as the mystery kept secret for long ages but now revealed to the saints.

He writes in Ephesians 3.6, this mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Romans 1.16, he says, for I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

And it's for that reason that Paul told the Corinthians as we saw, for I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

[37:14] Paul refused to empty the cross of its power by adopting worldly methods of lofty speech and impressive rhetoric for faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ.

Romans 10.17, the gospel is the climax of God's word. It is the power of God on the salvation. It is the pattern for the Christian life and so we seek as a church to be centered on the gospel.

How does this work out practically now? Sound doctrine. Gospel doctrine. We talked about this earlier. Sound doctrine is gospel doctrine.

The gospel is the interpretive key to the whole Bible. Like I said, it's the center, it's the climax of the redemptive narrative of scripture. So I said earlier that the word creates the church and the church guards the word.

Well, it can be said more specifically, the gospel creates the church and the church guards the gospel. The gospel creates the church.

[38:16] The church guards the gospel. Here's another thing, conversion and evangelism. A significant component of gospel doctrine is a biblical gospel-shaped understanding of conversion and evangelism.

If the spirit through the word and gospel raises the dead to life in Christ, and remember, that's what we're after. Raising the dead. Growing in holiness.

We're after spiritual goals. If the spirit through the gospel does that, then our task, church, our task in conversion, in evangelism, it's to faithfully speak, to preach, to proclaim the gospel, to hold it out to the lost clearly, compellingly, and then to fervently pray that God would do his work and awaken faith, raise the dead.

So that means we don't rely on church growth methods. We don't rely on having epic programs or cultural relevance. We do want to be culturally relevant, but we're not relying on that for growth.

We rely on the spirit's power through the proclamation of the gospel. Now this frees us, actually. This frees us from false guilt when the gospel is not received as we want it to be.

[39:39] And this also motivates us to bold and faithful witness because we know that that is the means that the spirit uses to save sinners. More could be said.

We're going to move on here. Gospel-centered worship. Gospel-centered worship. Yes, our gatherings, they center on the word, and more precisely, they center on the gospel.

We speak, I'm sorry, we speak, sing, pray, and preach the gospel. This corporate gathering is a service of gospel proclamation. Gospel-centered preaching.

Our specific aim in preaching is to preach the gospel. It's to preach Christ and him crucified from all of scripture. Do you remember the Bible study that Jesus gave on the road to Emmaus after he rose from the dead?

He showed those two disciples how the Old Testament points forward to him. That would have been an awesome Bible study to be a part of. He just led them through the Old Testament and showed up, this is about me and this is about me.

[40:41] It's all pointing to Christ. And so whether we're preaching Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John or we're preaching the book of Genesis, we aim to preach the glories of Christ in the gospel.

Gospel-centered discipling. In all of our discipling efforts, the gospel must be central. We never graduate from the gospel.

We never graduate from the gospel. The gospel is power for salvation. The gospel is power for sanctification. We don't graduate from it. So many of our fleshly struggles are a byproduct of either an incomplete understanding or application of the gospel.

So just one example, you know, we undervalue the love of Christ and so we become needy for the love of others. And what does that do? That places impossible expectations on our relationships. Okay, discipling is about helping one another understand and then apply the gospel into the nitty-gritty spaces of life. The last thing that I'll mention, meaningful, now we're going to talk about membership a lot and more in a couple weeks, but one aspect of meaningful membership is gospel stewardship.

[42:00] Part of what it means to be a member of a local church is to be a steward of that church's gospel witness. Some of us have been called specifically to teach and to preach the gospel, but all of us, saints, all of us are called to guard the good deposit of the gospel which has been entrusted to us.

Guard the good deposit of the gospel. Now this means it's helping ensure that both our doctrine and our practice match up with the true gospel of Jesus Christ. That means that when we stray as individuals or as a church, it's speaking up in love to help bring us back.

That's part of what our job as members of this body is. The gospel of Jesus Christ, it is a compass. It's pointing us true north, right? It points us to the glory and to the goodness of our triune God who in love planned and enacted our redemption.

It points us to the beauty of Christ and how life and salvation and satisfaction are found in Him. And it points us to the Christ-like pattern that we're called to imitate as disciples.

We seek to be a church centered on the gospel. Okay. You guys still with me? Got to engage listeners here.

[43:22] We seek to be a church submitted to the Word, dependent on the Spirit, centered on the gospel, and finally devoted to prayer.

We seek to be a church, a praying church. We seek to be a praying church. In prayer, expressing our trust in God, fellowshiping with Him, and partnering with Him in His kingdom purposes.

At the beginning of 2024, we did a three-part series on prayer. I would commend you to those.

These three statements here are really the three main things that we do in prayer.

We express our neediness and our trust in God. We fellowship with Him. We partner with Him in His kingdom purposes. Now, Sterling, if everything that we've said so far is true, if spiritual life and growth, the things that we're after, spiritual life and growth, if those occur by the Spirit through the Word and Gospel, if we're established as a people by God in His gracious will, then it follows that we would be a church devoted to prayer.

To put it another way, if we're as needy and dependent upon God as the Scriptures teach, then we will talk with God often. We will go to Him in childlike humility and in faith.

[44:53] Prayer is like breathing as Christians. Prayer is like breathing. You wouldn't swim in the pool. You wouldn't go for a run or a bike ride without breathing. You wouldn't do anything without breathing.

Prayer is like breathing. Now, consider this from the perspective of the ACTS acronym, Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication, Adore. In light of the glory of God's nature and character that He's revealed to us, we unceasingly adore Him.

He's worthy of all of our praise. So we adore Him. We're devoted to prayer. We're devoted to adoration. Because we continue to fall short of His glory, like we're all works in progress here and so we're all works in process, we fall short of His glory and so we're always confessing our sins.

If we were perfect, we wouldn't need to confess our sins. We're not perfect. So we engage regularly in confession. And because God forgives us and has lavished His grace upon us, we have constant reason to go to Him in thanksgiving.

Last, because all the goals we're seeking after are spiritual, eternal goals that only God can achieve, we bring our supplication continually before Him in prayer.

[46:09] In church, we have this assurance from Christ. Listen to this. 1 John, I'm sorry, John 14, 13 and 14. Jesus said that whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it. We don't have time to talk about what all that means. We preached through that a while ago. Anything that's according to God's will, if we ask it, He's going to do it.

So church, in light of our abundant neediness and the all-sufficiency of our Heavenly Father who hears our prayers, we have every reason to be, we seek to be, a church devoted to prayer.

So what does this look like practically? Well first, it's prayer here in corporate worship. We intentionally set aside meaningful time to pray all throughout the service and in particular the pastoral prayer that happens in the middle of the service that is intended to be a robust, scripturally informed prayer.

It expresses our need for and trust in God. It fellowships with God. It partners with Him in His kingdom purposes. Prayer during the service, prayer after the service. After the service, I typically invite people up here for prayer and we want this sanctuary to become a house of prayer in which brothers and sisters in Christ are spontaneously going to the Lord in prayer on behalf of one another.

[47:43] Okay, corporate seasons and I added, it's not in your notes, but and gatherings of prayer. Okay, so periodically we will set aside a specific season for there to be a heightened emphasis on prayer.

Now we've done this several times over our church's life. I think we hope for that to become annual. And then we also have monthly, maybe not all of you know this, we have monthly men's prayer breakfast and monthly women's prayer breakfast.

Go to those. They're so good. It's so good to just pray for an hour with your brothers. So I encourage you all, consider going the next time that happens. You won't regret it.

Prayer in discipling. Okay, in all of our discipling, whether formal discipling, informal discipling, we want prayer, prayer ought to be an indispensable part of our discipling.

And then, meaningful membership, praying for one another. We have a member directory and the chief aim of that directory is to facilitate members praying for one another.

[48:48] This is one of the greatest ways, if not the greatest, that we can minister to our brothers and sisters in Christ, that we can do spiritual good to one another.

It is through prayer. Just want to ask, members, are you praying for one another? Are you praying for one another? It's the best way that we can minister to one another. It's in prayer. Remember, we're after supernatural things that we cannot accomplish on our own.

We need the Spirit's help. And we get to call on the Almighty God of Heaven when we go before Him in prayer. Lastly, equipping the saints to pray.

As elders, we want to be equipping you all to pray. And so this is done as we model it here. It's done through preaching and teaching. We preach a topical sermon series on prayer.

Perhaps we'll hold an equipping class later on prayer. These are practical outworkings of the fact that we seek to be devoted to prayer. Okay.

[49:49] So we seek to be a church submitted to God's Word, dependent on the Spirit, centered on the Gospel, devoted to prayer. And why? Why? Remember, because we exist by the gracious will of God.

He is the great initiator of creation and redemption. Okay, and as I conclude here, maybe you're sitting here thinking, wow, Mike, I didn't actually learn a thing today. And you know what I say to that?

Praise God. Praise God. We are not trying to be novel here. Like, we really aren't. We're trying, we're not trying to reinvent the wheel. We're trying to give ourselves fully to the ordinary means of grace that God has ordained in His Word so that His extraordinary power might be manifested among us by His Spirit through the Word and Gospel.

And in that way, He gets all the glory. glory. So surely, may we as a church renounce all self-sufficiency and holy trust in our merciful and mighty God.

May we increasingly become a people that are submitted to God's Word, dependent on His Spirit, centered on the Gospel and devoted to prayer for His glory. Heavenly Father, what an awesome God You are.

[51:07] God, as You told, as Moses told Israel, it wasn't because they were more mighty than the nations around them. It wasn't because of their own righteousness. You chose them because You set Your love upon them.

You acted out of the overflowing abundance of Your goodness and Your holiness. And You have done that, Lord, to form us here as a people for Your own possession and glory.

God, it's all for Your glory. We're not here because of our intelligence. We're not here because of our purity. We're not here because of our strategies. We're here because of You. And so, God, we give You glory for Your grace that You have showered upon us.

God, help us. Help us, Lord, to submit ourselves to this Word, Your breathed-out Word, the Word of the living God. Help us, Lord, to be dependent on You, Your Spirit.

Without Your Spirit, Lord, we're wasting our time. It's Your power. It's Your presence that this world needs and that You've graciously poured out upon the church. God, we pray that You would help us to center our lives around the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[52:20] God, it is power for salvation. It is the pattern, Lord, for our lives as a church, as families, as individuals. God, we pray, help us, Lord, also to be devoted to prayer.

God, help us to give more of our time as individuals, as a church, Lord, to calling upon You, seeking You, Lord, seeking for Your will and Your kingdom to come, seeking for You to move in this world.

God, we're here because of You. Be glorified through us, Lord, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Amen.