

The Hard Question We Must Ask

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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How incredible it is that because he rose from the dead we now have eternal life, the very next chapter, 1 Corinthians 16 says as you gather together for the matter of business, and so as a church body, there are things that we just have to walk through that is procedural because whether we like it or not, outside of these walls there are means of, shall we say, litigation that hold us to the standards of the laws of our land that we need to be in conformity with on a variety of issues.

So let's transition to some good old Bible study. Y'all ready? Psalm 60. Psalm 60. I have entitled tonight a discussion, so to speak, or a message entitled "The Hard Question that We Have to Ask." Now I know you're thinking to yourself, "What's the hard question?" I'll get to that later. I'm not gonna tell you what it is. I'm gonna make you kinda ponder and think about that. But in Psalm 60, again for those of you that may not be familiar with this, this is a part of our Bible reading plan. I know this morning I kinda went outside our normal parameters and went back into Psalm 51, but today Psalm 60 was a part of this week's reading plan and I want to read just the first four verses of Psalm 60 and then apply it to the world that we're living in and then I'm gonna ask you to ask yourself a very important, very difficult question. It says,

1 O God, thou hast cast us off, thou hast scattered us, thou hast been displeased; O turn thyself to us again. 2 Thou hast made the earth to tremble; thou hast broken it: heal the breaches thereof; for it shaketh. 3 Thou hast shewed thy people hard things: thou hast made us to drink the wine of astonishment. 4 Thou hast given a banner to them that fear thee, that it may be displayed because of the truth. Selah.

Now as we look at any passage of Scripture, it doesn't matter whether it's in Psalms, Leviticus, the Gospel of John, typically speaking every time we address a passage of Scripture there are three very distinct approaches that we can and oftentimes need to take when looking at that passage: it has a historical application, a doctrinal application, and what we might call a devotional or a spiritual application. Let me kind of unpack those in regards to Psalm 60.

Where do we find ourselves historically? Well, Psalm 60 is like about half of the Psalms. The Lord inspired it through the person whom we know as King David and here we have King David recording a cry to God. Now very different than Psalm 51 from this morning where it was on the backside of his personal transgression, his personal violation of the precepts and the commandments of God, here we have David simply going about exactly what God called him to do, a "man of war." Now you remember that one of the reasons that God gave him for not being able to place the temple there in Jerusalem is that he was a man who had blood on his hands. God called him to expand the kingdom and then he called Solomon to establish the kingdom, and what we have in Psalm 60 historically speaking is David crying out to God on behalf of a war-like event that is taking place in his and Israel's life. In fact, contextually if you were to go back in the Old Testament, we'd find ourselves in 2 Samuel 8 and I know this is going to be a surprise to you, but again Israel finds themselves surrounded by their enemies, they find themselves outnumbered, and yet the Lord provides David and his men the victory. They not only capture the chariots and the weapons of warfare, there are multiple thousands of the enemies of God that are slain toward the eastern Euphrates. In fact, collectively speaking it was the Syrians as a whole who were those in this time that were the enemies of the Lord through the person of David and the army of Israel. And so when he cries out, "You've cast us off, you have scattered us, you have been displeased, revive us again," he's literally crying, "We're surrounded by our enemies. We don't know if we can get out of this. God, if you don't help, there's no way we'll have victory."

That is the historical application, now let's talk about the doctrinal for just a moment. A doctrinal application is oftentimes a specific passage, spoken to a specific people, at a specific time, for a specific purpose, and for those of you that were a part of us a couple weeks ago or maybe you have watched it since then, I want you to look at the last word of verse 4, "Selah." Those of you that were a part of that Bible study, we understand that it takes place a numerous amount of times here in the book of Psalms, that oftentimes when you see that word it is an indicator not only musically for a pause when singing but prophetically more often than not we have language there that has a Second Coming flair, aspects of what you and I know as the physical return of Jesus Christ, the kingdom coming in its presence through the person of Jesus Christ.

Now I want you to put your Second Coming hat on for just a moment, alright? I want you to think about what is referred to as Daniel's 70th week, Jacob's trouble, those famous seals being opened in the book of Revelation. Think book of Revelation for just a moment. Think about the Antichrist reigning all over the world. Think about his legions. Think about the mark of the beast. Think about all those things and I want to read these same words in light of a Second Coming filter. "O God, thou hast cast us off, thou hast scattered us, thou hast been displeased. O turn thyself to us again. Thou hast made the earth to tremble, thou hast broken it. Heal the breaches thereof for it shaketh. Thou hast showed thy people hard things: thou hast made us to drink the wine of astonishment. Thou hast given a banner to them that fear thee, that it may be displayed because of the truth. Selah." Specifically you see throughout the book of Revelation in these prophetic passages that the people of God who reject that famous mark of the beast, who stay faithful to the teachings of God, he supernaturally provides for them many times but in

particular in the book of Revelation 12 it says there comes a time where the people of God are fleeing from that person whom we know as the Antichrist or the beast. It takes place for about 3 to 3 ½ years. The Lord again much like he did in the wilderness, he supernaturally, he feeds them manna from the heavens. He opens up the earth so to give them a passage of deliverance and yet what does it say here? You cause the earth to tremble. You cause it to shake. And so even though David was surrounded by the Syrians, he was surrounded by his enemies and he called on the Lord to deliver him, the passage has a multi-layered interpretation that because of that word "Selah" we can look at these Second Coming aspects, we can look at these prophetic things, that there's coming a day where the people of God running for their lives from whom we know as the Antichrist, the Lord will open up the earth, he will cause it to tremble, and he will supernaturally provide for them even in the darkest of days. In fact, Jesus Christ made a very clear statement in Mark 13, that that time period that he called the Great Tribulation would be the worst time period in humanity since the creation of the world. But yet what do we have here? An affirmation that even in the midst of an event such as that, the Lord would provide for them.

So on one side of history we have David and the Syrians, on the other side of history yet to be fulfilled we have the tribulation and "the Second Coming." But you and I are right here in the middle and so how does this apply to us? How do we look at Psalm 60 and wake up tomorrow morning and go into whatever occupation or whatever struggles or whatever we're walking through? I find it interesting that it says that the people of God have been scattered. Isn't that what you feel like today? Don't you feel like that the world around you is trembling? Do you not feel like that the culture is shaking? In fact, if you look at Psalm 60, the first four verses, just through light of the last probably three months of life, it's very metaphorical to what we're walking through. Things that used to be firm are not as firm as they used to be. Things that used to be so secure are not as secure as they used to be and we've become a people who are scattered, people that are scattered desiring to be back together and he says, "Will you turn yourself to us again?"

You know, it's interesting in Psalm 60 there's almost an inference that, I don't want to say they deserved it but it was a rightful response of God. You know, as we look back on the last three months at the church of Jesus Christ in the world at large but particularly in our culture today, can we confess that pre-Covid and maybe even during Covid, we had become very Laodicean, we had become very lukewarm? We as a people of God have become more consumed with the things of the world than the things of heaven. We've become more desirous of the things of the temporal versus the things of the eternal and oftentimes the gathering of the believers, the study of the word of God, the singing the praises of God became an item of convenience rather than that of conviction and so can I say something that may be difficult to say: maybe just maybe our scattering, our "having the physical doors closed for just a brief amount of time," has been maybe just what we needed to get our attention.

You know, it's interesting, I've lost count of how many people who had become somewhat lackadaisical, I don't want to use the word lukewarm, in their gathering of the believers and their fervency to the things of the Lord when all of a sudden you can't go to

church, there's a desire to do so. I received an email some weeks ago. It was a fascinating email. It was in regards to this couple and their child that had made a profession of faith and the need to be baptized, but the preface to that which, by the way, is a wonderful celebration, is they made the comment in the last couple of years we've become very apathetic to the things of God. We've become more interested in the things that our children were participating with on the athletic field than we were in the church house and this pandemic has gotten our attention. I hope by your simple presence here tonight both in person and online you can say the same thing.

So maybe just maybe what we've been walking through is actually to our benefit. Let's look on the "backside" of both the historical and the doctrinal. David gains victory over the Syrians. He gains an incredible reputation among the enemies of the people of God of their strength and he actually possesses more authority and more favor by God on the backside than the front side even though he was surrounded and saying have you scattered us. What we know as the people of God in the tribulation obviously go into the millennial reign of Christ and that, my friends, is a whole lot better than that tribulation experience. So how do we walk through a global pandemic which as we're all aware is, shall we say, resurfacing it's ugly head again? How do we go forward in uncertain days? How do we as a people that have "been scattered" desiring to return and not necessarily having the means to do so, how do we address this?

Now the hardest question that we've got to ask I'm gonna save for the end, but based on Psalm 60, I want to ask you some very strategic questions this evening that you don't have to answer out loud, you don't have to raise your hand, I just want you to kind of let this mull around in your head. In the last three months as we've walked through a global pandemic, has the ability to communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ been hindered? Now before you answer that quickly, just because we cannot meet physically does not mean the Gospel has been hindered. In fact, one of the things that I have thought about at great length is the difference between information and communication. Information doesn't change, it's the way that we communicate it that it often does, and by the way, this is why I don't sleep at night. Maybe you don't think about these things but I do. We as a body of believers, we as the church of Jesus Christ particularly in our context in our culture, even as we walk through what we know as Covid-19, a global pandemic in the mountains, on the beaches, in foreign lands, stateside, small groups, large groups, but I've never done it on the internet and yet many of you gathered in your homes and we remembered the Lord's death. Many of you were around the breakfast table, the living room, you may have even been on the back porch. I don't know where you were. You know, the Bible says there's only two ordinances: the ordinance of the Lord's Supper and the ordinance of baptism and the only thing that we could do was to do it at our homes but did it keep us from remembering? No. Did the information go away? Of course not. We still remembered the Lord's death. Now what about baptisms? You do realize during a global pandemic there were 11 individuals that were baptized here at First Baptist, Opelika. Eleven people, and to the best of my ability and feel free to disagree with me, I think the only "piece of information" of our faith that cannot be done by way of those television cameras is a baptism. You have to go in the water. You have to. You cannot do a virtual

baptism. You literally have to go under. It is symbolic. It's picturesque of Jesus Christ dying and being buried for our sins.

And so as we look back at the last three months, the two ordinances that he gave us as the body of believers to continue to do, the Lord's Supper and baptism, we've still been doing them, we just haven't had large crowds of people gathered in one place to observe or to participate with them, and so really when we think about it, the information of our faith has not ceased to be transferred or ceased to be communicated, it's the way that we do so. Now many of y'all send me, you know, these memes that we have on social media, many of you sent me these and I appreciate them where it said, "And like that, overnight my pastor became a tv evangelist." I appreciate that. That's just part of it, but I want you to know that today I had a conversation in a local establishment today in our community by someone who basically said they had never stepped foot on our campus but the last three months they've watched us every week on tv. So the Gospel is still going forth, it just hasn't been done the way we're used to it being done. People are still being baptized, we're still celebrating the Lord's Supper, the information is the same, the way we communicate it has been different.

Here's the second question I want to ask you. In the last three months, are we reaching less people with the Gospel scattered versus gathered? Now you may be asking yourself, "I don't know the answer to that." So allow me to share some interesting pieces of information. When we gathered on this campus pre-Covid, and by the way, that may be one of those terms we use until the Lord comes back because the world may have completely changed because of Covid, but pre-Covid and a lot of this determined whether or not college was in session, it was a home game or a road game or such, but on any given Sunday from the nursery to your Sunday school class to this room across our campus we would have anywhere from between about 2,500-3,000 people. Now we know that on home games during the fall there would be more than that, and in the summertime particularly this time of the year there would be significantly less, but just as a general rule of thumb we'd have 2,500-3,000. What's interesting is that when those cameras turn on now, thanks to walking through a Covid world you may or may not know this, but we actually broadcast on over 10 different forms of media today. Some of you watch on OPS, our local television station. Some of you listen on 97.7 FM. Some of you watch by way of YouTube, Facebook, Instagram. There are some, by the way, I don't know if any of you know this, we discovered early in the Covid days that not everybody has social media, not everybody has email, and so have you liked the phone tree that is returns? I call your phone, and by the way people have learned that the number coming from the church is not a spam call anymore. But you know, back in the '90s we used to have a phone tree. Y'all remember what a phone tree was? You'd record a message and it would go through the alphabet of the church and it would send a specific message out, correct? And we discovered that we didn't have the technology anymore but now we actually have an app to do so, but as we have sent letters, as we have made phone calls kinda going back technologically, we discovered that there are some people who do not have access to local television that broadcasts our services, they do not have social media, they do not have internet like many of us do with broadband access. Did you know that there's actually a phone number that you can call and listen to the services on your

phone? Now here's what's great about it, it's like the old party lines. Y'all remember the old party lines years ago? Up to 40 people can be on the phone at one time and while the service is going on they can all talk to each other. I mean, it's like being in a small family of faith, all they have to do is call the number on their phone and they can be a part of the service.

Why is this important? Because there's really only three ways that we can "count" who is hearing the message: social media, that phone line that I shared with you, and our typical video platform. Did you know there's only really three ways that we're able to count people and yet with those three on a given week we are averaging double the numbers that we used to have in person? You see, one of the things that we've discovered is that particularly Americans are really good at time-shifting. Y'all may not be familiar with the term time-shifting, I heard it for the very first time walking through a global pandemic but you do it and you don't know it. Time-shifting is when you watch a television program at a different time than it was originally aired. Now I don't want to raise a hand of confession in the room. I'll go ahead and raise mine, anybody been guilty the last three months of binge watching something where you go onto some of these multimedia platforms and you watch a certain type of show and you just watch episode after episode after episode? We're guilty. I'll admit it. We've done so. I would daresay that since live sports went away and corn hole on the ocho doesn't count. Some of y'all know what I'm talking about there. That since live sports went away, outside of the local news I don't know if we've watched a single program in three months the original time and day that it was aired. In fact, some experts claim that Americans time-shift up to 95-96% of the time. Some of y'all do that with ball games. Hopefully we'll have those games soon again. How many times have you said, "I'm recording the game. Don't tell me about it." And you go back and you watch it maybe 30 or 45 minutes after it initiated and if you get rid of the commercials you can catch up, but you're time-shifting.

One of the things that we've discovered is that time-shifting is real even when the Gospel is presented. Let me use an interesting analogy for you. On Tuesday mornings the men gather together at a local eating establishment for several months, we'd have probably 75-80 guys. We'd have a biscuit, a cup of coffee and we'd do Bible study together. And then Covid hit and we just made a decision that I'd start recording it from my desk on my phone. Now we're doing it in the Well with a professional HD camera and we're broadcasting it everywhere. You know, we used to have 75-80 guys show up. Now while it is taking place our metrics are telling us roughly 250-300 people are watching and I know you ladies are watching. Your name comes up. No. It's fine. It's fine. But here's what's fascinating, even one of our Sunday morning services, several hundred may have watched in real time but that number gets into the thousands days later. I spoke to an individual the other day who said that our men's Bible study along with other things is a part of his podcast. He says when I go walking, determine on how long I want to walk is what podcast I put in. I know the men's Bible study is 45 minutes. If I want 45 minutes, I put you in. He said so oftentimes it's two to three weeks later that I'm participating in it. You know, when we gather it's one and done but thanks to technology it's archived and we have access to it in a variety of mediums.

Now I'm gonna share with you an interesting statistic that I learned from what we call Leadership Network. It's probably the largest data collecting pool of church base entities. Prior to what we know as Covid-19, the average faithful church attender, now I know some of you skew the average but the average person attended a live worship service 1.6 times a month or 18 times a year. Those of you that are Sunday school teachers, you can testify to that. Why? Because you can see the shifting within your class. You can see this person is there every other week, every third week for a variety of reasons. That's just who we were as a culture. They claim that as we roll out of Covid it's gonna go from 1.6 to 1.2. In other words, the on campus physical worship service is going to be attended at 25% less than in days past.

Now before you get all upset about that, let me share with you the good news. One of the things they've discovered is prior to Covid those people that attended 18 times a year did not watch online the other times. Now since they've been watching online, they may only attend 1.2 per month but there's better not than average that they will still be connected in an online environment. I've had some of you Sunday school teachers tell me that your attendance went up during Covid. Why? Because you've been up all night, you've been sick, you've been under the weather, you don't feel like physically getting to campus, well, thanks to Zoom and a variety of other means, all you've gotta do is black out the screen and you're in Sunday school and you can be there. And so that which may have kept us from attending physically, now we're connected virtually. That's one of the reasons that you'll see that almost every time we have any type of service whether it's a college service, student service, even a children's devotional, we're going to be broadcasting it because we're no longer in an either/or world, we're in a both/and world.

Third question that I want to ask is this. As we've walked through what we know as the Covid experience, do we currently possess a smaller footprint or a large footprint than we used to have for the Gospel? You know, I know the answer to that question. It may be a hard pill to swallow but all you have to use as an illustration is vacation Bible school. Can I be honest? Vacation Bible school is one of my favorite weeks of the year. You say, "Why is it your favorite week?" Well, typically we have a thousand kids on the campus, it also happens to align with my birthday every year and they sing Happy Birthday to me. I love vacation Bible school for a lot of different means. Those of you may not know at least two out of the last three years we've almost had a near death experience at our vacation Bible schools and one of them included me. So it's an exciting time for a lot of different reasons. It's one of the most evangelistic weeks of the year. It's one of the times where we have those who are the most, shall we say, attentive to the Gospel at their stage of life presenting the Gospel on a daily basis regular both in large groups, small group, friend to friend, parents and such, and yet this year again kind of like the Lord's Supper, we did something I never thought we would do, we had virtual vacation Bible school. I'm not gonna address the numbers because much like everything else the numbers were much higher online than they ever would have been on campus. Here's what I want to address: where did people attend vacation Bible school from this year? We would expect in a "pre-Covid" environment, Opelika, Auburn, Lee county, the surrounding area, maybe your kids or your grandkids are here from out of town and they would attend. We had

families that were tuned in from multiple states and countries. We had people in other countries that went to vacation Bible school in Opelika, Alabama.

Now how would they have pulled that off pre-Covid. It wouldn't have happened, would it? And one of the things that we're discovering is that our footprint with the Gospel has actually gotten larger, not smaller. The geographical limitations of this physical building don't exist on the worldwide web. So every time that one of our services is being broadcast, it could be a college service, it could be one of our worship services, it could be a daily devotional by our kids, whatever it may be, one of the things that we're discovering is that there are people from Indiana, Michigan, South Africa, Northern Ireland, Central America that are now a part of us.

I received a phone call this week. I will say that it is a friend of mine and has been for many years. His family is transitioning from life as I currently know it to the empty nest picture, and just to be quite honest with you and he's a dear friend and he's probably watching right now, their family has been a part of their local congregation mainly because of the student ministry that it presented for their family and now that the student part is no longer what it used to be, they are looking for a local congregation to meet he and his wife's needs. It's a story we hear quite a bit for a variety of reasons. He asked me this question and I know you know the answer to it. He said, "Jeff," he said, "while we're searching for a new home, you know that we attend First Baptist, Opelika every time you're on the air. Would it be okay if we just started tithing to y'all?" Sure.

Why is that an important analogy? Because "tithing" is something that most of us put in an offering plate and now we're doing it online, we're doing it in a drop box, we're even doing it from out of state. Our footprint, the furthering of the Gospel both in word and in financially is not limited to Lee County, Alabama. Our footprint has actually gotten larger.

So let me summarize these three questions before we get to the big one. Allow me to state the affirmative rather than the rhetorical question. Our way of communicating has changed but the information has not. We are actually reaching more people scattered than we are gathered. And our footprint has gotten bigger with the Gospel than it was three months ago. And here's the hard question I'm gonna ask. If all three of those are in the affirmative, why are we so desperate to gather again? Now let me state the obvious. You cannot get "fellowship" through a camera. You can't get it. That's been one of the beauties of gathering together again. You cannot hear each other sing on the other side of the camera. Now I know I can't sing, I can't even sing in the shower that's how bad I am, okay? But when I sing in my living room by myself, I think it's great. When I get in a room and see that the person next to me is actually on pitch and I'm not, then I realize how bad it is. But can I tell you the last two weeks how good it has been, last Sunday was the first time we gathered in 13 weeks, let's just go ahead and state the obvious: attendance was much less than it was pre-Covid. People were scattered. It was just different. Afterwards I asked my wife, I said, "Honey, what did you think?" And she said, "It was so good to be together again." I said, "What was good about it?" She said, "I needed to hear people sing. I needed it."

You do realize that we're the only faith that sings, right? No other faith sings. They don't have anything to sing about. You do know why you sing, right? Because you're happy, you're enjoying things, right? I mean, that's why you sing. No other faith sings. We're the only faith that sings and, yes, we have provided virtual "worship" but you cannot replace a handshake, a hug, which even in a socially distanced world is virtual, and you cannot replace us "singing together." But at the same time the hard question to ask is this: as much as we enjoy fellowship and as much as we enjoy gathering and singing together, the facts are that those cameras are actually reaching more people today than we ever did gathering in this place. Hear me clearly: we're not going to forsake the gathering of believers. We're not going to forsake gathering on campus. But here's what I want you, the people at First Baptist see here, this is just one of those gut-check realities. As we walk out of however long it takes to get out of this global pandemic, statistically speaking things are going to look different. I don't know the next time we'll pass an offering plate. Do you really want to touch something that 100 other people have touched before you? I mean, think about that for just a moment. Will we at any time in the near future do a meet-and-greet where we shake hands and hug necks in a very large format? I don't know if that will happen anytime in the near future. But that being said, we have to come to the reality that as we begin to gather again, it will not, at least in the early days, be near as "crowded" in here as it used to be.

You know, my favorite time of the year is Christmas Eve. I've told people before and everybody who's visited here there is nothing like Christmas Eve at First Baptist, Opelika. We typically, at least at our 5 o'clock service, have challenged the fire code. I'll just leave it at that. Many of you have stood against the walls, you've sat in portable chairs and you've been on the steps in the balcony. The number of pews there are. The thought of not having Christmas Eve this year like that breaks my heart. It breaks my heart. It's my favorite hour of the year. But I have to ask myself a question: how many people will be watching online? Oh, we're still gonna have Christmas Eve but it may look like this and you and I as the people of God have come to, gotta come to grips with the new reality that we're living in.

But I go back to Psalm 60, "You've scattered us. Turn yourself to us again." Verse 4, "You've given a banner to them that fear thee." A banner is a way of displaying, a way of propagating information. I'm just gonna speak personally. This isn't what I wanted, people. This isn't how I would have drawn it out. I cannot express to you enough how much it hurts to see more empty seats than filled seats but we have to realize there are a lot of people that are sitting on the other side of that camera. The impact has not lessened just because there are less people in the pews. The Gospel is actually going forth from First Baptist, Opelika more today than it was 13 weeks ago even though less people are on the campus. I implore you, I encourage you if you feel safe and if those who give us medical guidance deem it okay, please gather. Please fellowship and please let us sing together, but at the same time at the end of the day when we "all get to heaven," what a day of rejoicing that will be. You might be surprised how many people are there who were never in here because they were through that camera.

I run into people every single day who I've never seen on this campus, who live in this community, who say they watch us on television. We get emails every single day, people from other states and other countries that thank us for continuing in the midst thereof. Folks, like Psalm 60 we've been scattered but we've been given a banner. I think really tonight whether it did you any good was a sermon to myself. "Let us not grow weary in doing good," that's Galatians 6, by the way. Let us not grow weary. It is what it is. We'll keep doing what we do. Those of us who have the opportunity to gather, let us encourage one another, let us sing to one another, but let us not forget that one day we're gonna gather at the throne and there's gonna be a lot of people who are gonna be singing beside you who weren't here at Christmas Eve and they weren't here on a Sunday morning and they weren't here on a Sunday night. So I implore you, let us wave our banner no matter how we do so.