

“DISCOVERING THE WORD-CENTERED LIFE”

2 Timothy 3:16-17; Colossians 1:15-20 ¹

It was late on a warm Saturday afternoon when the familiar but dreaded call came: “This is ADT Security Services. There’s a burglar alarm at the St. Matthews Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. Can you meet the police there?” For five years, my life had been punctuated by such calls at varying hours of nights and weekends. Once or twice, there had actually been someone in the building, but never a burglar. On one occasion, I had arrived to find one of Nathan’s friends in handcuffs. He had neglected to tell the custodian that he was practicing the piano in a far-off corner of the campus, and the custodian had locked the building and set the alarm. I wondered what it would be this time.

The alarm control panel indicated activity in the sanctuary foyer, a large space with windows soaring toward thirty-foot ceilings. There had been a wedding that day, and the foyer doors had been open for a while to the pleasant afternoon breezes. Deceived by the expanses of glass, a sparrow had flown into the foyer and was still trapped there. He was tripping the motion detectors in his attempts to escape.

The police left me there with the bird. I opened four doors at right angles to each other and about fifty feet apart, hoping the bird would find his way to freedom. Then I sat down to watch what happened. For the most part, the bird repeated his flights toward the upper reaches of the glass, his internal senses telling him that this was the way to freedom. From time to time, though, he would fly between the plants at either side of the doors.

A brisk breeze was flowing through the doors, pointing the way toward escape, and the sparrow flew through this breeze many times, only three feet from freedom. But because he expected escape to be toward the sky, the bird never understood the meaning of the breeze. After about an hour of this, I locked the doors, turned the alarms off in the foyer, and went home, reflecting on the parable I had just witnessed. (I finally got the bird out the next day.)

As I drove home, I remembered the words of Scripture, “*There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death*” (Proverbs 14:12); “*Enter through the narrow gate,*” Jesus said, “*for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it*” (Matthew 7:13-14).

Do you remember the Air Force pilot about ten years ago who was practicing high-speed maneuvers in a jet fighter—in Arizona, I think? The pilot adjusted the controls for what she thought was a steep ascent—and flew straight into the ground. She had been unaware that she had been flying upside down.²

Like that pilot, you and I frequently find ourselves living high-speed lives, thinking that we are “right-side up.” Like the bird, we busy ourselves with trajectories that we think lead us to safety and to life, unable to recognize the true doorways to freedom that stand right before our eyes.

Few things in life are more tragic than climbing to the top of the ladder, only to discover that we’ve placed it against the wrong wall. Professor Dallas Willard, commenting on today’s culture in America, wrote that “What is truly profound is thought to be stupid and trivial, or worse, boring, while what is actually stupid and trivial is thought to be profound. That is

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on April 29, 2012.

² Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 1.

what it means to fly upside down.”³ So what are we to do? Is there no compass for our souls? Is there no guide to take us through the wilderness of our asphalt and digital jungles?

When I was on active duty in the Navy in the early seventies, the submariners bragged that the new Global Positioning System—then available only to the military—allowed them to know the position of their vessels within two or three hundred feet. Today, the GPS receiver in my phone can tell me my position within about six feet. It tells me my position by consulting reference points in the heavens, known as satellites. As amazing as this is, God has given us an even more wonderful locator for our souls, though we tend to miss it, as the sparrow missed the door.

This soul-compass is God’s written Word, and today we consider a second characteristic of Great Commission Christians, the Word-Centered Life.⁴ We also have a Guide, better than the compass, whose name is Jesus. The Bible is the Word of God, written; Jesus is the Word of God in human form. Let’s look at Scripture first.

Just as my GPS receiver tells me where I am in relation to the earth, the Bible tells me where I am in relation to eternity. Paul told Timothy, “*All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The Bible tells us that “*the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart*” (Hebrews 4:12), and God says, “*Is not my word like fire, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?*” (Jeremiah 23:29). “[My word] *will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it*” (Isaiah 55:11).

Many have wondered, and many wonder still, whether or not we can really trust the Bible as an accurate guide for our lives. Let me make a brief response to that question, because it is a very important one. First of all, while we don’t have any original copies of the Bible (“autographs”), we’re really quite certain of what the originals said, and here’s how we know.

A GPS receiver determines location by satellite triangulation. Triangulating involves taking bearings on three or more objects whose location is known. Where those lines of bearing intersect is your own position. There are twenty-four GPS satellites, and GPS receivers generally use between three and six of them to determine geographical location. We literally have thousands of early copies of biblical texts, and as scholars compare them with each other, they’re essentially triangulating from thousands of points to determine what the original manuscripts said.

While by such study we can be virtually certain of what was actually written on the very first biblical scrolls, there are still those who question the historical accuracy of its record. There are many excellent resources to consider with respect to this second question, but one of the best places to start is Josh McDowell’s classic reference, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*.⁵

³ Willard, p. 10.

⁴ See Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (HarperOne, 2001).

⁵ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict: Christianity Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson).

As Josh painstakingly catalogs, time and time again, one biblical detail after another has been verified through archaeological and other research. As just one example, some scholars used to scoff at Exodus 13:17-18, where it is recorded that “*When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, ‘If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.’ So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea.*”

These scholars said, “That area was nothing but desert. There was nothing—and nobody—there. There was no one to fight. The text is absurd.” About thirty years ago, though, archaeologists discovered a whole series of ancient military outposts buried in the sand along the seaward road. The text spoke the truth.

The fact is that the biblical texts have been so often confirmed by both experience and research that we do well to grant the presumption of accuracy to the Bibles in our hands as completely reliable transmitters of God’s message to us, though to say this is not to solve every problem. Even if we grant that we have an accurate text and that the text speaks the truth, there are still many places where, although we know what the text says, we’re not sure what the text means. Happily, no essential principle of our faith rests on such uncertain passages, and we’re wise if we avoid making too much of those passages that are not yet fully clear.

I suggest to you that we will do well to follow the example of Billy Graham, who has preached the Gospel with transforming power to more persons than anyone else in all of Christian history. As a young preacher, Dr. Graham struggled over many of the same questions about the Bible that you and I may have. On one transforming afternoon in California, Billy went out alone into the pine forest to think, to pray.

With his Bible spread open on a tree stump he dropped to his knees. “O God!” he prayed, “There are many things in this book I do not understand. There are many problems with it for which I have no solution. . . . But Father, I am going to accept this as your Word—by *faith!* I’m going to allow faith to go beyond my intellectual questions and doubts, and I will believe this to be your inspired Word.”⁶

As Richard Foster put it, Billy Graham “rose from the ground, eyes stinging with tears, sensing the presence of God in a new and living way. This conscious resolution settled the battle in his soul and galvanized his faith. Since that day, the singular focus of biblical authority has given unusual power and authority to his preaching.”⁷

Billy Graham’s approach to the Bible, the approach that led to his power as a world-changing preacher of the Word, has been to stand under it in humility rather than over it in the arrogance of human judgment. It’s been said that to stand under the Word seeking understanding requires us to look up, which is a very good way to understand.

Having said all this, my point is that **the Bible is our compass, our heaven-guided GPS**, and it is a reliable and trustworthy one. But the function of a compass or a GPS is to take us somewhere. The goal is not the instrument itself. **The point of the Bible is to get us to Jesus**, since “everything in the Bible either looks forward to [Jesus] or flows from [Him].”⁸

So who is this Jesus to whom the Scripture points? The Bible tells us that “*The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things,*

⁶ Billy Graham, *Just As I Am* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 46.

⁷ Foster, p. 210.

⁸ Foster, p. 227.

and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:15-17). And Jesus himself says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

History tells us that a great many of the people who heard Jesus speak and who watched His life and His signs of power concluded that they would be fools not to follow Him. In the centuries that have followed countless others have come to the same conclusion, once they’ve really understood things as they are; that is, once they have “seen the compass work.”

That’s what happened after Peter’s famous sermon in Acts 2. Peter simply preached the essentials of the Gospel: (1) *God proved that Jesus was his Son* through many signs and wonders; (2) *You killed him*; (3) *God has raised him from death*; and (4) *therefore you can be saved from your sin by trusting in Him*. And later, Peter pointed out that “Jesus left you an example, so that you can follow in His steps” (1 Peter 2:21).

It was late on a stormy August night in 1975, and I’ve never seen such lightning as we had that night. Nathan had been born just a few days before, and our destroyer was now involved in war games off the coast of North Carolina in the vicinity of Onslow Bay. I was the Officer of the Deck. There were no exercises scheduled before morning, but we were still supposed to avoid the “bad guys” as we steamed through the night.

At about 1 a.m. we picked up some radar contacts about twenty miles out that tracked on a constant bearing with decreasing range. That meant that if nothing changed, our relative motion was such that we would eventually collide with each other. As was customary, the Captain’s Night Orders required me to wake him to tell him about any contacts that would pass within two miles of us. Since we were close to shore in fishing waters, I called the Captain and told him that, while the contacts would pass close aboard, they were probably small fishing boats.

Time passed, and eventually the running lights of the contacts began to be faintly visible at the horizon, even in the storm. As soon as I saw them, I knew that these were not fishing boats. They were warships. It was the “bad guys.” I ordered the engines to full speed, and I ordered the helmsman to throw the rudder hard over. As we did a U-turn and headed back out to sea, I called the Captain again to confess my mistake. Fortunately, it was only a game.

But life itself is not a game. The Bible says, “*God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son of God has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life*” (1 John 5:11-12).

My friend, do you want to live your life “right-side up,” in a world that makes sense, both in time and in eternity? There is a right-side up, and you can find it.⁹ But finding your way in the universe requires you to make some choices. As Augustine put it, “He who created you without your help will not save you without your cooperation.”¹⁰

The Bible says, “*If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved*” (Romans 10:9-10). The Bible also says, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:13). The point here is that in order for Jesus to become our Way, our Truth, and our Life, we must personally choose to follow Him.

⁹ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), pp. 13, 33.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Sermons*, 169.13, as cited in Foster, p. 198.

It's important to understand, though, that following Jesus as your Guide is not about simply "accepting a set of beliefs that will somehow trip a divine lever and get [you] into heaven when you die."¹¹ Following Jesus is about *re-orienting your entire life*. The journey toward becoming a Great Commission Christian begins with a U-turn that points your heart toward Jesus, but it progresses by continual daily choices governed by the compass of Scripture and empowered by God's Spirit.

Are you willing to do what it takes to become "*a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth*" (2 Timothy 2:15)? The compass of God's written Word can only be of use to you if you learn how to use it and then follow it, even when your senses may want to choose another direction.

And Jesus, that Word to whom Scripture points, can only guide you if you choose to follow "in His steps." The only way you will reach the destination God desires for you is for you to choose to follow your Heavenly Guide, even when He leads you by ways that do not always make sense to you.

And so, my sisters and brothers, **I invite you to a Word-Centered Life**. Will you choose this day to continue to fly against the windows that lead to death, or will you choose the open door that leads to Life? I invite you to come, as Billy Graham has always invited, "just as you are."

¹¹ Foster, p. 221.