

“THE WORD TRANSFORMS LIVES”
Isaiah 35:1-10, 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, Matthew 1:18-25
December 10 & 11, 2022

We’re in our third week of Advent and we’re discovering the difference that Jesus makes as the Word of God. As we’ve seen, the Word was with God at the very beginning of creation, and was in fact God, bringing all things into being. Then, as God saw our situation of being lost because of our sin, He devised a plan for us to find life through His Word. The Word became flesh to dwell among us so that we could see His glory and believe in Him as the Son of God, Emmanuel, God with us as Christ the Lord.

But what difference does it make for us to believe in Jesus being our Savior? Why is it so important that we celebrate His birth and remember the work that He did for us? Why do we need to have anything to do with Jesus?

Tim Giago shares the difference that salvation makes. He brings the work of Jesus into a personal decision, showing the vulnerability of God for each one of us. I invite you to hear the account of Dr. Karl Schlesier.

“World War II was drawing to a close. The German army was sending children to man the front lines in a futile effort to stop the Allied invasion into their homeland. It was March 1945. Dr. Karl H. Schlesier, a German soldier, remembers this time:

“I was . . . in a battalion of teenage grenadiers fresh out of training [and] was sent into the front line east of the Rhine River after American forces had established a foothold on the east bank.

“Fresh American units were pushed across, and our battalion was ordered to plug a hole in the front line. We dug in three companies abreast on a slight rise in front of the little town of Kirchhellen. I was with the 1st Company in the center of the position. My company . . . numbered about 80 teenagers.

“In bitter fighting American troops pushed through on both sides but got stuck in front of my company. About 17 or 18 of us were left. . . . We huddled in two-man foxholes.

“On the morning of March 28, amid smoldering tanks and twisted bodies, there suddenly came

an eerie silence. ‘I looked over the hole I shared with a buddy and saw no life but a movement in the busted roof of a farmhouse about 200 yards away,’ Schlesier said. Feeling sudden panic, he stood up in his foxhole and fired four rapid shots at nothing in particular.

“The eerie silence was broken by a single voice. A lone American soldier had walked . . . calmly toward the entrenched Germans, saying in a calm and low voice, ‘Come on out. Come on out.’

“[Schlesier remembers:] . . . The American soldier had two machine guns trained on him, and we were sure he knew this, but he just kept on coming. To have shot him would have seemed like murder because he was not a threat. He just wanted us to give up.

“[Schlesier's] foxhole happened to be directly in the path of the approaching American soldier, so Schlesier and his buddy were the first to confront him. He was startled to see that the soldier was an American Indian. He had the classic face of an Indian, and it was not threatening to the German soldiers.

“The German soldiers did as he said. They dropped their weapons and took off their helmets, tossing them back into the foxhole. The Indian soldier . . . told them to put their hands over their heads. Then he turned and walked toward the American lines without looking back as the German soldiers followed. Schlesier was overwhelmed.

“He must have been the most reasonable man, the most perceptive, the most understanding, and by far the most brave. We had not expected to live, and he must have seen how idiotic this wall was, and he acted on his own to save us, risking his life in the process.’

“Later in the prisoner-of-war camp we talked about him. If he had not come to get us, we would have died in our foxholes. His action was a personal one. He was not ordered to do what he did. . . . I owe him my life and have lived it.”¹

Jesus came to a war-torn world to bring life to those who were surrounded by death. He was not ordered to come out to us, offering us safety and shelter. He came on His own to save us from the

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002] pg. 167-168)

ravages of death. He came out of love for each one of us so that we could have life through Him. But it takes us hearing Him, believing Him and receiving Him into our lives as one who is not threatening, but one who brings hope for the future. And it takes us to trust Him enough to do what He tells us to do so that He can lead us to safety.

Isaiah 35 gives us the picture of what life looks like when we decide to follow the Lord. As we trust in the Lord our God, new life is given to the parched and broken. The glory of the Lord will be revealed and we will see God's work among us. The feeble and the weak and the fearful will become strong when the presence of the Lord is with us, for He has come to save us. Blind eyes will see; deaf ears will be opened; the lame will dance; the mute will shout for joy. The desert will become lush with vegetation and the burning sand will bring forth life to sustain other life all around. And those who choose to walk in the ways of the Lord will find safety and peace and the Lord will bring rescue to those who will walk along His highway. "*Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away*" (Is. 35:10). The ways of the Lord will bring such great differences than the ways of the world, and we are invited to hear the voice of God and follow Him so that we might find life in Him.

But how often we are tempted to follow the ways of the world, convinced that we know what is best for us, and that fights against following the desires of the Lord. The world tries to persuade us that the Lord's ways are foolishness and worthless. The world tells us that we are "out of our minds" if we follow the ways of the Lord, for they are so different than how the world lives (2 Corinthians 5:11-13).

However, if we were to trust our hearts and listen to the voice of the Word of God, we see that He desires our best. God desires that we gain life through Him, but if we continue to follow the things of this world, it only brings death to us. To fight against God in the worldly trenches and fox-holes of life, there is only one result - death. So Jesus has come to us to free us from the things of this world and to lead us onto the highway of God so that we might find life and peace through Him. He has come to reconcile us with the Lord God once more so that we might find comfort and rest for our souls.

But the battle rages on within each one of us as to whether we will follow God's way or not. Our

decision about God's invitation to follow His ways will determine what the end result will be. Listen to how one man struggled with the situations in his life and what his decision was. This is Matthew 1:18-25. (READ Matthew 1:18-25)

Mary had already given God permission to use her to do His great work of bringing His Son, Jesus, into the world in a miraculous way. Because she had boldly decided to follow the highway of God in order to bring about the Salvation of all people, God was now working to provide protection for her from the lions and the wolves of the world. He would make sure that her journey following His Way would not come to destruction, but rather life. But Mary would not be able to do this great thing all on her own. She needed help; a helper who could stand next to her and protect her; one who could lead her through the day to let her know she was doing what was right; a person whom she could depend upon to keep her safe from those who might want to keep her from accomplishing her call from God.

So God appealed to Joseph to boldly stand alongside her to make sure that the plans of the Lord would become fulfilled. Joseph was a righteous man, being faithful to the Law of God. It was not by chance that he was engaged to Mary. God was directing them to be together so that together, they would be able to support and encourage each other to keep following God's way, even if it seemed wrong in the eyes of all of those around them.

Yet nothing like this had happened before in the history of the world, a virgin conceiving and giving birth to a son. It had been prophesied, but the actual fulfillment of that prophecy had not yet happened. BINGO! Here it was, and Joseph and Mary were to be the ones to make it happen. They were only engaged to be married, betrothed to each other, awaiting the marriage day to come. And there was so much to lose if Joseph decided to do what God was calling him to do. The "what-ifs" of the world began to overwhelm him and his fear became great enough for him to want to get out of the whole situation and let Mary go it alone. Joseph contemplated divorcing Mary to protect himself.

The worldly side of Joseph brought up all kinds of questions about how this could have happened that Mary became pregnant. In the eyes of the world there was only one way that a woman

could become pregnant - through sexual relations with a man. Mary had traveled to Judea to be with her cousin Elizabeth. Who might have taken advantage of her along the way? Who might have wooed her enough all of those months to convince her to give herself to him for a one night stand? What soldier might have forced her beyond what was right? Which man violated her and made her pregnant? It was not uncommon for those kinds of things to happen in those days, and it continues to happen even today. How could Mary have allowed such a thing? Being a typical man, Joseph had a hard time believing what Mary was telling him what really happened, that the Holy Spirit of God was the One who made it happen. All kinds of doubts were fighting against his reasoning capacity.

You see, God had not fully informed Joseph about what was really happening. He only knew what his eyes were telling him. At first, he responded like everyone else would, with skepticism and doubt of Mary's account of what the angel had told her. He would need more convincing if he was going to be a part of this whole adventure. This was a monumental decision that he had to make, so he needed all the information he could get to make the right choice. So God sent Gabriel to him to tell him what God was doing in and through Mary.

While the world would accuse her of being unfaithful to her "husband," Joseph was being asked to stay in the relationship and step up to take Mary as his wife and become the protector for her, so that she could complete her pregnancy and give birth to the Savior of the world. Mary's survival depended upon Joseph accepting God's invitation and following through on the marriage.

While the worldly mindset plagued Joseph to the point of him considering giving up on Mary, Gabriel's visit opened up his eyes to see beyond what his physical eyes were seeing. Just the time when he was deciding to end the engagement, yet quietly in order to protect her, God intervened and explained it all to Joseph. Mary had been faithful to him! She was answering God's call to do this mighty work for Him. But it was now his call. The decision would forever change his life and people would never look at him the same again. What would he do? Joseph made the decision to accept God's explanation and he decided to take Mary as his wife in order to fulfill what God had asked him to do.

Yet, the people of Nazareth would sneer and mock them both. They would not understand. Yes, they would criticize them and think and say all kinds of horrible things about them. Yes, the people would look at them both in a different way, even to the point of isolating them and refusing to do business with Joseph. Who knows how many contracts canceled on him because the folks would have thought that he had been faithless and impatient to abide by the Jewish traditions of marriage before knowing his wife? The battle within them to keep doing what the Lord had called them to do would be difficult because of the huge pressure to concede to admit the “wrong they must have done” in the world’s eyes. After all, women don’t just get pregnant on their own, you know.

But with the assurance that God was going before them to guide them along in His way, doing His will, Joseph and Mary could rest in His plan, even if all of the others misunderstood. Doing God’s will is not always easy, but when we stay true to our faith and trust in God, He always leads us to live in such a way as to bring honor and glory to Him.

Throughout history since Jesus’ birth, life, crucifixion, burial and resurrection, people have stepped up to follow the Lord God’s call in their life to stay strong in their faith. The Word of God, Co-Creator of the world, Jesus, the Savior for all who will claim Him and follow Him, transforms the weak faith of those chosen by God, so that they can do great works in our world. People have trusted in Jesus and stood strong against the evils and wickedness of the world. The transformation of the Word in their lives has given them the inner strength and determination to follow the Lord and remain faithful to His ways and commands.

Even today, young men and women are trusting in the Lord Jesus to guide them in their faith, especially when the world tries to convince them otherwise. Chad Farnan discovered that his uncompromised faith in Jesus could marginalize him from many others. As a high schooler, he had a stereotypical Southern California laid-back surfer look. He was tall, athletic, easygoing young man focused on water polo. “A good student supported by a great family, Chad was sailing through high school as a popular, well-adjusted student-athlete, the last guy you would expect to become the victim of

bullying.”²

Having committed his life to Jesus Christ when he was in sixth grade, Chad had decided he wanted to follow Jesus for the rest of his life. He grew deep in his faith with his family attending church and youth group. Life was good for him - he was popular, looked up to, and handsome. “Here was a guy we might jokingly refer to as a jock, not really setting the world on fire in the classroom, sailing through life without a whole lot of worries or concerns. Fully devoted to God, yet not set on some strategic plan to change the world. Could God use an ordinary guy like Chad Farnan to take a stand for His kingdom?”

Chad encountered a teacher of an AP European History class who daily bashed Christianity, doing his best to belittle the faith and anyone who believed in Jesus. This teacher didn’t teach much European history, but rather focused on trying to destroy the faith of anyone who believed in Jesus. Chad quickly found himself on the front line attacks against the very conservative values he held dear to himself. The teacher was using his position to ridicule the Christian faith and malign all of its values.

Chad had a decision to make. Would he simply drop the class, like a lot of other students who were believers were doing? Or would he stick it out and stand up against all of the ridicule the teacher was putting out against Christianity? After all, he wouldn’t just be standing up to the teacher alone, but against all of the other students who thought this teacher was cool.

Chad decided to accept God’s call for him to stand up to the teacher’s tirade against Christianity. He sought legal advice from Advocates for Faith and Freedom, and through lots of prayer and thought, decided to proceed to file a lawsuit seeking the dismissal of the teacher for violating his First Amendment rights, since he was being bullied by the teacher while in class.

That brought a lot of attention to Chad, but not all good attention. As he walked through the halls of his school, he got laughed at by students, and glared at by teachers in the name of academic freedom. It was as if they were saying, “How can a religious fanatic student like you think you can tell

² (Tony Perkins, *No Fear*, [Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2015] pg. 59-70)

us what we can or cannot do in the classroom?” Daily Chad faced ridicule from the students that opposed him, and silence from the students that supported him - they didn’t want to get into the fray with him. Then, he began to receive threats and bloggers around the nation were doing their best to make him look bad. His standing up for his faith put him right in the sights of everyone who disliked Christianity. What could he do? Chad found himself second-guessing himself regularly.

He kept wanting to call the whole thing off and slip back into anonymity. But God kept telling him that he was doing the right thing, that he would always face opposition, and that He would always be with him. It was that encouragement that kept Chad going.

Though, initially having the district court ruling in Chad’s favor, finally, Chad lost the law suit, when the teacher’s appeal to the Ninth Circuit Court ruling in favor of the teacher. Though he lost, he set a precedent and served notice to teachers that people of faith in Jesus Christ were not going to tolerate attacks on their faith so that other students can feel empowered to also stand up for their faith in the classroom. He put on the whole armor of God (Ephesians 6:11) and fought the good fight of faith.

So how about us? When we find ourselves being called by God to do crazy, and maybe impossible things, what will we do? Will we stay true to our faith and let God use us, even when the whole world turns against us? Or will we stand on the sidelines and let the world run all over us?

Following God’s call in our life is never easy, but as we let the Word of God transform our lives, we will find the strength and encouragement we need to stand strong in our resolve to be true to His call. Then we will be able to see God’s provision and presence with us along the way. Let’s pray.

Father, we live in a world bent on destroying our faith in Jesus. Though the way is hard, give us the courage to stand strong in our faith in You. Help us to learn from those who have followed Your call, maybe at great expense, so that we might also be courageous to live every day of our lives faithful to You. Don’t hide us from controversy and trouble, but give us the strength and wisdom we need to live as righteous examples so that You might transform not only our lives, but the lives of others around us. This we pray in Jesus’ powerful and holy Name. AMEN.