

February 3, 2008 by Steve Brandon



The Core Beliefs of Rock Valley Bible Church

Hebrews 4:12-13; Jeremiah 32:17; Romans 1:16

We believe in ...

1. The Power of the Word (Heb. 4:12-13)
2. The Power of God (Jeremiah 32:17)
3. The Power of the Gospel (Romans 1:16)

This morning is the day in the life of our church where we have our annual meeting. This is simply a time for us as leaders to report to you all of where we have been as a church and where we are going as a church. It's an opportunity for us to report to you of the financial state of the church and give you a vision for the church in the future.

In light of this meeting, I thought that it would be good for us this morning to think about what's going on at Rock Valley Bible Church. To do so, I want to ask the question, "What are the core beliefs of Rock Valley Bible Church?" In other words, what are the most central beliefs that we hold that secure and drive us as a church? It's important to keep our sights on our core beliefs.

Allow me to illustrate this with some events that took place this past week. As many of you know, my wife, two of our children, and I attended the wedding of a friend in California. Fortunately, my in-laws live close by, which allowed us to stay at their house. We flew out to California this past Wednesday. We landed in Oakland and were picked up by my mother-in-law. I offered to drive the car, which I knew that she would appreciate. Now, I didn't know the way home. I sort of had an idea, but didn't quite know. So, I relieved upon her to guide me.

Well, she was so excited about seeing us that she was overly engaged in conversation and neglected her role as navigator. We ended up taking a wrong turn. We left the airport and took 880 north, just as we should have done. However, rather than turning east on 580, we continued west. Then, we faced a traffic jam on the freeway and had to travel through the downtown city streets of Berkeley to get back on track. We wasted probably 30 minutes in doing so. Later that evening, I recall talking to my wife about my absent-minded mother-in-law.

After a few days of a wonderful visit, we came back home on Monday morning. We awoke at 4am to catch the 7am flight to Midway. This time, my father-in-law was driving us to the Oakland airport. For one reason or another, he missed the turn as well. He continues on 680 north, instead of heading west on 24. We tried getting off at the next exit so that we could get on to 24 heading west. However, the signs were confusing and we ended up on 680 south once again and couldn't get onto 24. So, we had to get off the freeway again a mile or two down the road, only to drive back north and take the correct turn to 24.

Now, while at the airport, as we were awaiting our flight, we were talking about how funny it was that Yvonne's parents both missed turns to and from the airport. We chalked it up to them getting old and absent minded and clueless about life. Don't get me wrong, I love my in-laws. They are some of the sweetest people that I know. They are just getting old. That's it. It gives a good occasion for a few laughs.

Then, Monday afternoon, we arrived at Midway. After talking over our actions, we decided that it would be best if I would leave Yvonne, Carissa, and David with the luggage in the baggage claim area alone, as I did the manly thing and retrieved the car from long-term parking. I dutifully went out of the terminal and hopped aboard the shuttle bus. We probably sat for 5 minutes and then the bus left the airport. Pretty quickly, I discerned that something was wrong. I could see our van in the parking lot, as we drove past the parking lot and under the train tracks and into the city.

Apparently, I had jumped aboard the wrong shuttle bus. This one was for Midway employees, who parked way out in a remote parking lot. It was a good ten minutes away. When we got to the parking lot, everyone got off the shuttle bus, except for me. And then, we waited another five minutes for others to come aboard the bus. And only then, did we return to the airport, which took another ten minutes. As we were approaching the parking lot where I could see our van, I asked the bus driver if he would be so kind as to drop me off at the stoplight. He did, but said, "Watch carefully for the traffic." So, there I was running across the streets of Chicago trying to get to my van to drive us home.

When finally I retrieved our van and returned to the airport to pick up my family, we had a good laugh in telling them what took place. Perhaps I'm the one getting old and senile. Perhaps I'm the one who is clueless about life.

Here's my point: How easy is it for us to lose our way when we aren't paying attention to what's going on. What's true of travel to and from and around the airport is also true of our lives. How important is it for us as a church to really think deeply about what's going on. If we fail to keep our eyes upon our core beliefs, we can easily forget them. And so, this morning, we will look at the core beliefs of Rock Valley Bible Church.

Now, obviously, there are many things that we believe. The Apostle's Creed says it well, ...

I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was

buried.
He descended into Hades.
On the third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
From thence he shall come again to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic (i.e. universal) Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.
Amen.

Certainly, our beliefs line up with all of these things. And certainly, these things are core to our beliefs. But, these sorts of things are not in my aim this morning.

My aim this morning is to crystallize for you three core beliefs that we have as a church, which have a direct link to our methodology as a church. In other words, my aim is to reduce our most basic beliefs that affect why we do the things that we do.

I'm also thinking of some beliefs that not all churches share, but are central to all that we do. These beliefs drive us as a church. This morning, I have crystallized the core beliefs of Rock Valley Bible Church down to three points.

We believe in ...

1. The Power of the Word (Heb. 4:12-13)

Hebrews 4:12-13

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

From these words you get the sense of the power of the word of God. It's living. It's active. It's comparable to a sharp sword that can cut. The writer here says that the word of God is sharper than any human sword. The reason is quite simple. It doesn't merely cut flesh and blood. The word of God can cut into the inner recesses of a man.

Just as a surgeon can take out his scalpel and cut through the skin and scrape the marrow from the bone. So also can the word of God cut into our inner beings. The word can "pierce as far as the division of soul and spirit." That's deep into each of us. It is even "able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

The word of God is powerful. As a church, we believe that it is.

At this point, it is important to point out that these words come as the punch at the conclusion of an exposition of Psalm 95, which the writer to the Hebrews was using to convict the hearts of his readers to believe in Christ.

Hebrews 3:7-11

Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, "Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as when they provoked Me, as in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tried Me by testing Me, and saw my works for forty years. Therefore, I was angry with this generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart, and they did not know my ways'; as I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.'"

These words are a straight quotation from the last half of Psalm 95, in which David was warning the people of his day to worship the Lord with a right heart. Then, throughout the rest of the passage, the writer picks apart these words and explains them and reasons with them and applies them to his hearers. Notice how the writer to the Hebrews develops his argument based upon the words from Psalm 95.

3:13 - "Today" (Psalm 95:7)

3:15 - Quotes from Psalm 95:7-8

3:16-18 - Explains the words quoted in Hebrews 3:15. It was the people of the days of Moses who failed to enter the rest.

4:1-2 - The implication is explained: They heard the word, but were unbelieving. We have heard. Make sure that you believe.

4:3 - Quotes from Psalm 95:11, which directs his attention to the theme of "rest."

4:5 - Quotes again from Psalm 95:11.

4:7 - Quotes Psalm 95:7-8 again.

4:11 - The summary comes from the implications of Psalm 95: be diligent to believe the word.

And then, we come to our text here in Hebrews 4:12, where the writer says, "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

So, do you see the point? He used Psalm 95 to drive home his point about the power of the word of God. And as the writer simply opened up Psalm 95 and let it speak to us, it has a way of piercing deep into our hearts, and accomplishing the work of God in our souls.

How is it that the word of God does this work in our hearts? Because, as we speak the word of God, it is really the Spirit of God that speaks. And when the Spirit speaks, He searches our hearts. I don't think that it is any accident at all that in chapter 3 verse 7, the writer says, "Just as the Holy Spirit says, ..." To be sure, it was David who was writing Psalm 95. But, in a greater way, it was the Holy Spirit who was writing Psalm 95. And so, as Psalm 95 was opened up to us, it unleashes the Spirit's words to accomplish His work in our hearts, convicting us of our own unbelieving, and calling us to believe in Christ Jesus. God's word is powerful. It is "living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword."

The amazing feature of Psalm 95 is that the people who didn't believe had seen unbelievable miracles take place at the hands of Moses. Ten Plagues came upon the land of Egypt and left. The Red sea was parted. Water was made sweet. Manna from heaven was provided. Water came out of the rock which was able to give drink to millions. Yet, having seen all of those miracles, they continued in unbelief. So, notice how the writer to the Hebrews brings it back to the word. They didn't believe God's word!

In 2 Peter 1, Peter makes a powerful statement regarding the power of the word, over and against miraculous experience. Peter first explained his own experience upon the Mount of Transfiguration, where he saw Christ transformed. He was an eyewitness of the majesty of God (2 Peter 1:16). Peter heard the voice of God (2 Peter 1:17-18). Then, he says, "We have the prophetic word made more sure" (2 Peter 1:19). At the end of the day, it is the word of God that is more powerful to create belief than any miracle or experience that you may have!

And so, one of the core beliefs of Rock Valley Bible Church is that we believe (1) The Power of the Word (Heb. 4:12-13). One of the implications of this is that we, as a church, will preach His word expositionally. By this, I simply mean that we will work long and hard to make sure that we expose the truth of God's word and so let it loose to accomplish its purposes.

This is what expository preaching is by definition. It's preaching that "exposes" the original intent of the author, by explaining passages of Scripture and by applying them to the congregation. The fundamental aim of expository preaching is to hear God's original message from the text and press its proper application to the hearers. This is different than "topical" preaching, which first begins with a topic (like anxiety or friendship or faith), and then uses the Bible like an encyclopedia to discover what God has written on such a topic.

Now, there are times and seasons for such preaching. But, you need to see the fundamental difference between the two styles of preaching. One comes to God's word, aiming to teach about a selected topic. The other comes to God's word, aiming at clearly communicating God's message in the way in which God said it.

For example, too often, the book of Romans is seen as a simple doctrinal statement. However, it is really an evangelistic tract. It is a missionary letter which Paul wrote in seeking to secure some financial help for its message to go to the end of the world. When Romans is preached with such a flavor, there is a greater power that comes from the words, than there is when simply considering the text as a doctrinal statement. When you preach as the Holy Spirit wrote, it is His message and not yours.

Another example comes in 1 Corinthians 13, "the love chapter." Fundamentally, the chapter isn't a flowery, sentimental chapter on love. Rather, it is a rebuke to a church that wasn't loving. When you preach this passage as a rebuke, the Holy Spirit is then allowed to speak more clearly.

Another example comes in Luke 15, which tells of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Often, these words are preached simply for evangelism, pleading the lost one to return home. However, the context of the parables is that Jesus was confronting the self-righteous religious people who viewed sinners with contempt. The application of the Spirit's words comes to convict our own hearts of our own contempt for sinners and our unwillingness to go find the lost sheep.

When these passages are preached in this way, you will set loose the Holy Spirit to accomplish His purposes, because His message has been preached most clearly. When you believe that there is power in the word, itself, then you will seek to bring out its message most clearly, for all to understand what God's word says.

Many have given Charles Spurgeon the credit for saying, "The word of God is like a lion. You don't have to defend a lion. All you have to do is let the lion loose, and the lion will defend itself." [\[1\]](#) It's true, we need to be about proclaiming the word of God, because there is the power! Isaiah the prophet said, "My word ... which goes forth from My mouth ... will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the manner for which I sent it" (Is. 55:11).

When God's word goes out, it is powerful. It matters not whether a Christian hears God's word or a non-Christian hears God's word. The word of God can work in the heart of a Christian. The word of God can work in the heart of a Non-Christian. That's the point of verse 13, "And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do."

To the unbeliever, the word of God is the powerful agent that the Holy Spirit will use to convict the world of sin, righteousness and the judgment to come (John 16:8). The only way that people are converted to Christ is through the word. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). David said that "the law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul" (Ps. 19:7). That is, the word of God is capable of "turning the soul back." It can convert the soul. It can turn the wayward soul back to the Lord.

To the believer, the word of God will teach us and train us. When Paul wrote to Timothy, he said, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). It's no wonder that a few verses later, He told him to "preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:2). That's the way that God works. He works when His word is proclaimed.

I believe that the best way to do this for a church is through expository preaching. That is, preaching that will endeavor to unleash the truth of God's word by explaining its meaning and by applying its implications.

And so, over the years, you will see us majoring on expositional preaching through books of the Bible, seeking to let the message of each book come through loud and clear. Historically, at Rock Valley Bible Church, we have done this. Since I have been here in Rockford, I have preached through 1 Thessalonians, which took us about 26 messages over the course of a year. We followed this with an exposition of the book of Matthew. This took 4 years and 137 messages. Along the way, we went through the book of Habakkuk in three messages. In recent days, we have gone through Colossians in 32 messages. Philemon took 5 messages. Malachi took 11 messages. And now, we are in 1 Peter, which I hope to finish before the end of the year.

What makes this preaching “expositional” has been the aim of the messages. I haven’t tried to come up with unique twists on each of these books. I have tried to allow the author to speak for himself. Let the message of the Bible come through.

Now, “expositional” preaching doesn’t have to be verse by verse, addressing only three verses each Sunday. If that were the case, it would take us 10 years to get through books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel or Job. The result would be that they would be left untouched. You can preach expositionally through Job in four messages and do a good job of allowing Job to speak. Going through the book of Romans in 16 weeks, taking a chapter each week can be expositional, if you are seeking to explain the meaning of Paul’s letter. In fact, on one occasion, I preached through the Pentateuch (the first 5 books of the Bible) in 10 messages. I believe that those were expositional messages, because the intent was to explain those books.

Expositional preaching isn’t a matter of speed through a text. Rather, it’s a matter of placing yourself at the mercy of the Holy Spirit and seeking to proclaim His message through any particular section of Scripture. Furthermore, expositional preaching doesn’t have to be through entire books of the Bible. You all know from time to time, we have different messages from different portions of the Bible. But, in almost all of these instances, the aim hasn’t been to think of a neat idea and find a text that teaches that. Rather, the aim has been to select a passage and preach the passage, keeping in step with the Spirit of God, who wrote it in the first place.

That’s the heart of expositional preaching. It’s not choosing a topic and discovering everything that you can find about a particular topic and sharing what you learned. Rather, it’s going to a text and allowing the text to speak for itself. And this is exactly what the writer to the Hebrews is doing here in Hebrews, chapters 3 and 4. He’s interpreting and applying Psalm 95 to his readers.

We believe in (1) The Power of the Word (Heb. 4:12-13). Thus, our diet will be a healthy dose of expository messages from this pulpit. Let’s go to my second point.

We believe in ...

2. The Power of God (Jeremiah 32:17)

To begin this point, I want for you to turn in your bibles to Jeremiah 32. I want to read one verse for you and then make a few observations in general about the power of God.

Jeremiah 32:17, “Ah Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You.” That’s a powerful God. “Nothing is too difficult for [Him]! And it all comes back to the power of God as demonstrated in His creating the world. He is the one who made the heavens and the earth.

I have six observations for you concerning the power of God. [\[2\]](#)

Observation #1: God is the creator.

In Genesis 1, we read of the mighty creation of God. He speaks and the world comes into existence. For instance, in Genesis 1:3, we read, “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.” In Genesis 1:11, God said, “‘Let the earth sprout vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit after their kind with seed in them,’ and it was so.” In Genesis 1:24, God said, “ ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind’; and it was so.” Such statements are a reflection of the power of God. Without hands, without test tubes and beakers, without raw material of any kind, God simply speaks and things come to be.

I love the story of the scientists who came to God and told him that they no longer needed him. “God, we’ve decided that we no longer need you. We’re to the point that we can clone people and do many miraculous things, so why don’t you just leave us be.”

After waiting patiently for the scientist to finish, God said, “Very well. How about this? Let’s have a man making contest.”

The scientist, with great arrogance said, “That would be fine.”

The Lord added, “Now, we are going to do this just like I did back in the old days with Adam.”

The scientist said, “Sure, no problem,” and then bend down and grabbed a handful of dirt.

God said to the scientist, “Whoa! Wait a minute. You go get your own dirt!” [\[3\]](#)

We may be able to do many things, but we cannot create from nothing. But, this is what God did merely by speaking them into existence. Hebrews 11:3 says, “By faith, we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that

what is seen was not made out of things which are visible." The creation gives witness to God's "eternal power and divine nature" (Rom. 1:20). And, we believe in such a powerful God.

Observation #2: God rules over the objects of creation.

In the days of Noah, God brought the water upon the earth to flood it. He said, in Genesis 6:17, "Behold, I, even I am bringing the flood of water upon the earth."

When the plagues came upon the Egyptians, it was God who brought the hail upon the land. In Exodus 9:23, we read, "Moses stretched out his staff toward the sky, and the LORD sent thunder and hail, and fire ran down the earth. And the LORD rained hail on the land of Egypt."

God controls the weather. Consider the following verses.

Psalm 147:15-18

He sends forth His command to the earth; His word runs very swiftly.

He gives snow like wool; He scatters the frost like ashes.

He casts forth His ice as fragments; Who can stand before His cold?

He sends forth His word and melts them;

He causes His wind to blow and the waters to flow.

The objects of creation are under the sovereign control of God.

Observation #3: God rules over the animals.

Not only has God created the animals, but He also controls their actions. When Noah had finished with the ark, the animals came at the Lord's bidding to the ark so that Noah might take them on board (Gen. 6:20). Noah didn't need to go and hunt them down and gather them onboard the ark.

When the plagues came upon Egypt, God is the one who brought the frogs and the flies (Ex. 8:13, 22). Exodus 8:13 says it this way, "The LORD did according to the word of Moses, and the frogs dies out of the houses, the courts, and the fields."

When Elijah told Ahab that there would be no rain for three years, the LORD said to him, "Go away from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. It shall be that you will drink of the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to provide for you there" (1 Kings 17:3-4). God gave command to the ravens to bring Elijah the necessary food to sustain him and they obeyed.

When Daniel was thrown in the den with lions, it was God who protected him. Daniel's testimony to Darius was this, "My God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths and they have not harmed me" (Dan. 6:22). God rules over the animals

Observation #4: God rules over the spiritual beings.

Throughout the Scripture, we often hear of the angels that God has sent. He sent an angel to rescue Peter from prison (Acts 12:11). God will send angels as the final reapers before the day of judgment (Matt. 13:41).

God even sends evil spirits, that is, demons. Consider the following passages, "God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech" (Judges 9:23). "Now the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD terrorized him" (1 Samuel 16:14). "The LORD has put a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets" (1 Kings 22:23). Notice that each of these instances has the LORD sending the evil spirit.

Even Satan, Himself is under the rule of the Lord. The LORD placed boundaries upon the devil as he went to smite Job (Job 1-2). When Satan wanted to sift Peter like wheat, he had to first ask permission to do so (Luke 22:31). When Jesus commanded Satan to depart, he complied (Matt. 4:11). God's ultimate authority over Satan is seen on the day that "the devil [is] thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:10).

Observation #5: God rules over human beings.

The mere fact that the Lord breathed life into Adam demonstrates that He rules over man (Gen. 2:7). The fact that the Lord sustains man demonstrates that God rules over us as well. "If God should determine to do so, If He should gather to Himself His spirit and His breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust" (Job 34:14-15). "In Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). "Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them" (Psalm 139:16).

But, it's not merely physical life that God rules over. He determines when and where each of us will live. "God made from

one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation" (Acts 17:26). We may make our plans, but according to Proverbs 16:9, "The LORD directs his steps." God raises up leaders (Is. 44:28-45:1). God pulls down leaders (Exodus 11:1). The LORD buries every king.

God's kingdom is "an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation" (Dan. 4:34). In God's eyes, "All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; And no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'" (Dan. 4:35).

Observation #6: God rules over the souls of men.

It's precisely at this point where many begin to part ways with the power of God. Many believe that He rules over all of life, but not the souls of men. But, listen to Proverbs 21:1, "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes." The king of a country might like to think that he is the one who is in control. But, in actuality, it is God who is in control. God moves his heart wherever God wants it to go.

One of the great examples of this was the case with Herod and Pontius Pilate. When Jesus walked upon the earth, the LORD's hands were all over their hearts. The early church prayed thus, "Truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur" (Acts 4:27-28). To be sure, Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles and all who had a hand in the death of Christ were all guilty for their actions. And yet, God is the great mover of history, moving the hearts of men to accomplish His purposes.

Regarding our own souls, it is God who rules over them. If you this morning are a believer in Christ, it is solely due to God's grace in your life to overrule your sinful nature and give you a new heart to discern the truth of the gospel and believe. According to 1 Corinthians 2:14, "a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned." The only ones who can spiritually discern the truth of the gospel is those who God elects and changes their heart to believe. None of us would ever do this on our own.

God is the one who rules our souls. He is the one who "causes us to be born again" (1 Peter 1:3). It is the Spirit of life that God blows into our hearts that gives us new life in Christ (John 3:3, 8). We can take as much credit for our spiritual birth as we can take for our natural birth. ... None. It's all of grace.

At Rock Valley Bible Church, we believe in (2) The Power of God (Jeremiah 32:17). And thus, we embrace the doctrines of grace. We believe that salvation is all of grace, and none of us. It was God that "chose us in Him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:3). When people believe the gospel, it is only because God appoints us to eternal life. "When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). Notice that the text doesn't say that those who believed were appointed to eternal life. On the contrary, it is the other way around. God had appointed these people to eternal life before the foundation of the world. When the gospel was heard in their ears, they embraced the truth. Notice their joyful and enthusiastic response. They "began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord." This is always to be the response to grace.

Over the years, I have heard some say that such doctrines often have a sorrowing effect upon people. "These doctrines turn people to be intellectual and cold and proud," they say. Now, this may be the case with some, but such a response is surely a wrong application of such truths. Of all doctrines, the doctrines of the grace ought to dispel all pride and coldness of living. Personally, my experience to these things has been utter joy and thankfulness and love to God for His great grace to me.

This week, I read a testimony of a woman who donated a kidney anonymously. Here is a brief section of her entire testimony.

The week before the surgery the hospital made the match. Four days prior to the operation I traveled to Northwestern Memorial Hospital again to meet with the surgeon to go through the transplant surgery. The nurse in charge of donor patients said the hospital had told the recipient that they were getting a kidney and would not have to wait any longer. The nurse said the family was crying. The realization that a family just learned that they were getting a kidney before Christmas and would not have to do dialysis hit me hard, and I choked back the tears. Words cannot describe how happy I was for the family. I would have been okay if at any moment God had closed the door until the point when the hospital told the recipient that they had a match. Then I went before the Lord asking that there would be no false hope for the recipient and their family. I prayed that I would remain healthy, and their body would accept my organ.

The day after the surgery, the recipient asked to meet me. She was in her thirties, a wife and a mother, who had been on dialysis for four and a half years while on the kidney transplant waiting list. My pain and discomfort from surgery paled in comparison to hers while she anxiously waited for a kidney donor. Her brother had also had a kidney transplant, and the family had previously suffered through the process. Her genuine thankfulness overwhelmed me and my husband. Meeting the recipient was one of the most precious moments of my life. I will never be the same having met her. Our stories and our lives are now intertwined. I pray that she will be able to experience life to the fullest, that she will offer a gift of love to others as she has been given a gift of love.

This is the effect that should come about through the doctrines of grace. "Her genuine thankfulness overwhelmed me and my husband." So likewise our genuine thankfulness ought to overwhelm God. We have been given a gift of love. Our rightful response is to give our love to

others. A proud or cold response simply cannot do.

When we come to faith, it's not because of our own effort or our own choosing. Rather, it's because of God's sovereign pleasure. "As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). John is going out of his way to make it clear that it's not because of the family into which we were born, nor was it an act of the human will that we believe. Rather, it's because of God's will that we believed.

This is the clear teaching of Jesus. There was a day in which Jesus was talking with the Jews about the bread of life, which was Jesus, Himself. Jesus said such things as "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me" (John 6:37). A few moments later, Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent Me draws Him" (John 6:44). The Jews took offence to these things. Jesus then said, "There are some of you who do not believe ... For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father" (John 6:64-65). Such words demonstrate very clearly that Jesus believed these things.

When it comes to salvation, God doesn't choose the strong and mighty and wise and intelligent. Rather, "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong" (1 Cor. 1:27). And God does so with a purpose. He wants to make sure that nobody will have any grounds of boasting before God (1 Cor. 1:29). Should we have anything to do with it, we would be able to boast. But, as it is, we have nothing to do with it. It is "by His doing that we are in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:30). It is not our doing. Our faith is a demonstration that God has worked His salvation in us.

It all comes back to the (2) The Power of God (Jeremiah 32:17). God's power extends to His rule over our lives. He is in control.

Perhaps the clearest passage in all of the Bible regarding these things comes in Romans 9. Romans 9:18 says this, "He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires." A few verses later, Paul continues on, "Does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us" (Rom. 9:21-24a).

We have every right to take a lump of clay and use it for our own purposes. We have every right to fashion fine china out of it, which will be used only on the most special of occasions. We have every right to take the same lump of clay, and make a toilet out of it. Why? Because we are the potter. The potter has absolute right over the clay. So also does God have every right to make some as vessels of wrath, which have been prepared for destruction, and to make other vessels of mercy, which will be with Him in glory. Because, God is sovereign over our souls.

Finally, this morning. We believe in ...

3. The Power of the Gospel (Romans 1:16)

On this point, I want to center our thoughts on one verse, Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16). You can't get much clearer than Romans 1:16 says it. There is power in the gospel.

As you think about this, you might easily reflect, "What a strange thing." We can understand power in the words of the president of the United States, whose mere words can shake national economies. We can understand power in a magnetic personality who promises health, wealth, and prosperity to all who hear. We can understand power in a large assembly of people (that's what makes the Super bowl so special -- hundreds of millions of people will be watching it). We can understand power in an air show, as we see and hear the roaring of the jets and they scream by the airport at low altitude. But, "power in the gospel"?

The gospel of God is none of these things. By in large, the gospel isn't spoken by rich and famous and powerful people. In great measure, the gospel promises you a life of suffering. Jesus said that we must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Him. There are few who believe the gospel, so great crowds won't bring it power. The gospel doesn't bring you great might and power and strength in this world.

You say, "What's the gospel?" It's simply this, we are sinners, who are on a path headed to damnation, when we are judged by the infinitely holy God. There was absolutely nothing that we could do to save ourselves from this "terrifying expectation of judgment" (Heb. 10:27). But, as a manifestation of God's great love, He sent His Son to rescue ruined sinners like us. His name is Jesus Christ. He came and lived a sinless life. Nevertheless, He was "despised and forsaken of men" (Is. 53:3). He was carried away to execution as a common criminal, even though He "committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth" (1 Peter 1:22). And as He died upon the cross, something marvelous took place. "The LORD caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him" (Is. 53:6). Jesus, Himself, "bore our sin in His body on the cross" (1 Pet. 2:24). Though His death, Jesus conquered death.

To receive this forgiveness of sins, we simply need to repent from our sins and believe upon Jesus. We don't come to Him with our good works to offer for our salvation. We don't come to Him with our religious reputation to give in exchange for salvation. We don't come to with our beauty, as though we deserved salvation. We don't come to offer God anything in exchange for what He gives. We simply come to God with our sin, confessing that we are sinners.

And the amazing thing is that God actually receives us and redeems us from our sins and reconciles us to Himself. That's the gospel. It's the greatest story ever told. It's the greatest news that you will ever hear. "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to [many after His death]" (1 Cor. 15:3-5).

There is power in this message. This simple message has turned drunkards into respectable citizens (1 Cor. 6:10). This simple message has turned homosexuals into straight men and women (1 Cor. 6:10). This simple message has turned idolaters into God-worshippers (1 Thess. 1:9). This simple message has turned demon possessed men into spirit-controlled men (Mark 5:1-20). This simple message has turned the

worst of sinners into the greatest of saints (John Newton, Augustine, the apostle Paul).

And if this morning finds you entrapped in any sin, this message of Christ crucified is sufficient to give you the strength to overcome sin. In fact, I'll say it more clearly than that. If you are engulfed in any sin today, the gospel is the only hope that you have of overcoming your sin!

Before we continue on, I want to make a crucial point here in Romans 1. The gospel isn't only for unbelievers. The gospel is also for believers as well. We all need to hear the gospel. Look at verse 15. Paul writes, "For my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome." The simple question at this point is this: to whom is Paul writing? Verse 7 gives the answer, "to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints." To whom is Paul writing? He's writing to the Christians who were in Rome during the first century. And he said in verse 15 that he was eager to preach the gospel to them. Paul longed for the desire to step foot in the church in Rome and preach to the believers there of the saving grace of God in Christ.

How can that be? Aren't those people already saved? Do they need the gospel? Why does Paul have this desire? Because there is a way in which the gospel puts our focus directly where our focus needs to be.

As believers in Christ, we can have "bad days." We awake late in the morning and rush off to work without giving any thought to God. While at work, we grumble and complain at our boss. We laugh at the dirty jokes that are told. From our own mouths slip some words that ought never to come from our mouths. When we finally arrive at home, we are grumpy, and waste 2 hours watching garbage on television. Christians can have days like this.

What we need more than anything on that day is the gospel. We need the reminder that our standing before God isn't based upon our own religious performance before God. Rather, our standing before God is based upon the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to our account. That message will give us great hope! That message will give our heart reason to rejoice.

Just as believers in Christ can have "bad days," we may have "good days," as well. We awake in time to spend an hour alone with God. We head off to our work and rejoice in God all the day long! After work, we meet with a friend, and share the gospel with him. After dinner, we willingly serve our wives by cleaning up after dinner. Before bedtime, we lead our family in a time of Bible reading and prayer. After a day like that, our temptation will be to think highly of ourselves. We might easily set our heads on our pillows and pray, "God, I thank you have made me to be a righteous man."

What we need more than anything on that day is the gospel. We need the reminder that our standing before God isn't based upon our own religious performances. Rather, our standing before God is based upon the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to our account. That message will humble us! That message will again direct us to the true hope that we have. Our hope isn't based upon our own performance. Rather, our hope is based upon God's provision of a Savior for us. [\[4\]](#)

Paul was eager to preach the gospel to the church in Rome, because there is power in the gospel. In fact, there is so much power in the gospel that Paul made it the first priority as he ministered to those in Corinth. "For I delivered to you as of first importance, that Christ died for our sins" (1 Corinthians 15:3). The first thing that Paul did when he came to Corinth was to speak about a crucified Savior, which is another way to describe the gospel.

But, the gospel was more to Paul than the first priority. It was the only priority! Consider the amazing statement that Paul makes concerning his ministry among the Corinthians. He says, "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2).

When Paul was among the Corinthians, he was always talking about the gospel. He was always talking about the death of Jesus. For Paul, the cross was everything to Him. He told the Galatians, "May it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14).

Now, why would we do this? Catch this. It may come to a bit of a surprise to you. Paul focused his time and effort upon the cross, because Paul was into church growth. He wanted the church in Corinth to be as strong as it would possibly be. So, he focused all of his energy upon the one thing that gives the strength: the gospel of Christ.

Look back at chapter 1, verse 17. Paul wrote, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void" (1:17). In other words, as Paul would drift from the message of the gospel, say by presenting the gospel softly, or by holding back the full implications of the gospel, or by being clever with the way he presented the gospel, or by preceding his message with a really great worship band, or by having some skits and drama that be really creative and witty, then, the cross of Christ would be voided. It would be empty. It would have no power. The church would not grow.

Now, if you do these things, you might draw a great crowd of people. It may look like you are growing. But in doing these things, it may well be that you void the cross of Christ. In other words, people may easily come because of the side show and not for the main show. In 1 Corinthians 2:1, Paul talked about how he didn't come with superiority of speech or [with superiority] of wisdom. In verse 4, Paul continues on, "my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom." It's because these things don't belong with the gospel.

When people speak with great, elegant words, they run the danger of eclipsing the message of the cross, because people may be more persuaded by the messenger than by the message itself! When people speak with great persuasive wisdom, they run the danger of overshadowing the message of the cross, because people may be enamored by the great wisdom of the speaker, rather than by the message itself! When Paul came to Corinth, he specifically made sure that it wasn't his great eloquence of intelligence that drew people to God. He spoke "in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, ... so that [verse 5], your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God."

There is power in the gospel.

And, here's the big implication for us this morning. (2) We believe in the power of the gospel (Romans 1:16), so we will focus our attention upon the cross of Christ. We will speak without apology about the cross of Christ. We will focus our attention continually upon the cross of Christ. We will sing about the cross of Christ. We will meditate upon the cross of Christ. We will pray in light of the cross of Christ. The simple reason is because it is powerful in our lives.

"The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). We find our strength in the cross. We find our hope in the cross. We find our joy in the cross. We find our meaning for life in the cross. We find our example for living in the cross. We love the cross of Christ. It has a power in our life.

That's not the case with everybody. There are some who think that the cross is foolishness (1 Cor. 1:18). Down in verse 23, we see that the Jews stumble over the message of Christ crucified. "A crucified savior! It can never be!" In verse 23, we see that the Gentiles consider the message of Christ to be utter foolishness. "They are wasting their time over there at Rock Valley Bible Church." But, such things really ought not to matter too much for us. Because, we believe (3) The Power of the Gospel (Romans 1:16). And so, the cross of Christ will forever be at the center of Rock Valley Bible Church.

Here is a fitting summary of my message, with our beliefs and the implications of these beliefs. Learn well these words.

- 1. We believe in the Power of the Word (Heb. 4:12-13), so we preach expositionally.**
- 2. We believe in the Power of God (Jeremiah 32:17), so we embrace the doctrines of grace.**
- 3. We believe in the Power of the Gospel (Romans 1:16), so we focus on the cross of Christ.**

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on February 3, 2008 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Although this quote is often credited to Spurgeon, I could find it nowhere in all of his writings. Nevertheless, it still gives a great illustration of the power of the word.

[2] For these observations, I am indebted to Arthur W. Pink's book, "The Sovereignty of God." In chapter three of this book, Pink follows the same sort of logical flow that these observations follow, beginning with the sovereignty of God as expressed in creation and culminating in the sovereignty of God over the souls of men.

[3] I couldn't find any original source for this illustration. A simple Google search will reveal that this story has been told many times before, all with slightly different twists. But, they all get the point: only God can create out of nothing.

[4] I'm indebted to Jerry Bridges for this illustration. On pages 13-19 of his book, "The Disciplines of Grace," he puts forth "the bad day" and "the good day" and demonstrates that "Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the *reach* of God's grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the *need* of God's grace" (p. 19).