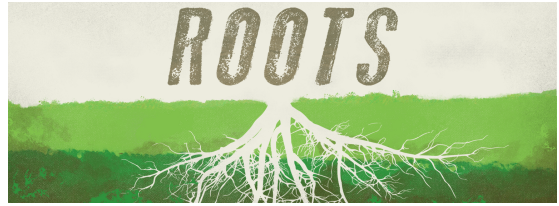


DISCUSSION GUIDE :: WEEK 1

ROOTS
A FEW SIMPLE THINGS RIGHT NOW
LUKE 15:1-10
10/22/2017



MAIN POINT

Growing deeper roots of faith begins with a few small steps right now.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

We all know how important roots are to a tree. Describe the various functions they serve and the dangers of having weak roots?

Now translate that illustration to spiritual life. What is the importance of having deep spiritual roots? What are the dangers of weak roots?

Today we begin a new series, "Roots." Sometimes we make commitments to God to change part of our lives, but when the winds of adversity blow, in a few weeks or months we tend to go back to our former ways. But if we had deeper spiritual roots, we could stand tall during those times. Over the next few weeks, we will consider the question, "How can I grow deeper roots?" Growing deeper roots begins with finding ways to obey, believing God pursues me as much or more than I pursue Him, and remaining committed to Him.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ACTS 8:26-39.

This section in Luke's account marks the second time the reader meets Philip. The first introduction to Philip's apostolic ministry occurs earlier in Acts 8:4-13. Due to the persecution that broke out against the church led by Saul of Tarsus, many believers fled from Jerusalem, including Philip. As they did, they took the gospel of Jesus with them, teaching and preaching along the way. Philip went to Samaria, in no small part because the Jewish men who were persecuting the church would resist going to Samaria at all cost. When Philip arrived in Samaria and began preaching Jesus, many of the Samaritans believed. This was the state of ministry for Philip at the point when God called him and sent him to the road between Jerusalem and Gaza.

The first simple way we can grow deeper roots is by finding ways to obey. What do we learn about obedience from Philip's example in this story? How do you think you would have responded in Philip's situation—being called to leave a thriving, fruitful ministry season to go stand next to a desert road? Why do you say so?

How have you seen similar responses in your journey with God up until this point?

How would you describe Philip's awareness of God's moving around him?

Philip wasn't the only obedient one in this story. What steps of obedience did the Ethiopian take?

What about you? Is there a small step of obedience you need to take to grow your roots? What has been stopping you?

Philip was a faithful man. When God called him to serve the church in Acts 6:5, he obeyed. He responded with the same quick obedience in 8:26 as he left his successful ministry in Samaria at the angel's instruction. As a result, the Lord used Philip powerfully in the life of the Ethiopian man. The Ethiopian man also demonstrated obedience when he chose to be baptized as soon as he saw water. No matter what step of obedience you need to take, growing deeper roots happens when we don't try to negotiate or wrestle with God, but respond to Him and His work in our lives.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ LUKE 15:1-7.

What does the parable teach us about God, specifically about His relationship with the people He created?

The second simple thing we can do right now to grow deeper roots is to believe God pursues us as much or more than we pursue Him. Jesus demonstrated this truth in the parable we just read from Luke 15. The scene is a pastoral setting of a shepherd with a flock of 100 sheep. Somehow, one sheep wanders from the flock and cannot find its way back. Jesus described the sheep as "lost" from the flock, a word that implies a life-threatening situation for a sheep. The safety of the many did not remove the shepherd's concern for the missing one. He went looking for the lost sheep.

How does it make you feel to know that God pursues you the way it is described in this parable?

What is the best way to respond to God's pursuit of you?

What about the dry seasons in your life? How can you still know and trust that God pursues you then? What are some ways you can still pursue Him, even when you don't feel like it?

The parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15 describes the shepherd's joy when he finds his lost sheep. Jesus said there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than the many—the 99—who don't need repentance. No one is so lost as those who fail to see their lostness. We respond to God's pursuit of us by pursuing Him, even when we don't feel like it or find ourselves in a spiritually dry season. Looking to Jesus and the cross reminds us that even though we didn't ask for Jesus or deserve Him, God loves us and pursues us enough to send Him to our rescue.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ NUMBERS 23:19.

The third simple step we can take right now to grow deeper roots is to remember that because God does not change, neither should our commitments. Look specifically at verse 19. How can this verse give us confidence in the Lord and in His promises?

If the Lord has chosen to bless us, can anyone impede or negate that blessing by a curse, charm, prayer, or any other method? Why is this significant?

What did it mean for Israel that God was with them (v. 21)? What does it mean for us?

Verse 21 says the Israelites rejoice over the King among them. That King is God Himself. This line is poetically parallel to the third phrase in verse 21, "The Lord their God is with them." It would be many years until Saul was chosen as their first king. Even then it is clear that it was God's desire that the Lord would be the king over Israel (1 Sam. 12:12).

Can we claim verse 23 as a promise for Christians today? Explain. How can believers today be certain that God is acting on their behalf?

Why is the gospel the ultimate demonstration of God's care of and protection over you? How can you use the truth of the gospel to maintain your commitments to God?

The greatest example of this principle can be seen in the death of our Savior, Jesus Christ. God allowed Jesus to suffer at the hands of evil people to accomplish our salvation. Evil cannot change God's plans or defeat His purposes. He remains committed to His plan. As Christians, we can know that God is sovereignly watching over all the events of our lives. In that confidence we can maintain our commitments to Him.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

If you heard the sermon on Sunday, what was your main takeaway?

Of the three "simple things we can do right now"—find ways to obey, believe God pursues us, maintain our commitments to God—which do you need to give more effort to in this season of your life? What will that look like this week, and how can our group hold you accountable?

PRAY

Close in prayer, asking God to help you take active steps of obedience in faith this week and to encourage others to do the same.

COMMENTARY

ACTS 8:26-39

8:26. The southernmost of the five chief Philistine cities, Gaza lay about fifty miles southwest of Jerusalem. It was destroyed about 98 b.c. and then later rebuilt by Pompey. Philip, sent by an angel, would soon enter a new phase of ministry.

Surely the place and timing seemed inappropriate. Why would God move him from an area-wide evangelistic campaign just getting underway in Samaria, down to this lonely desert road? Luke wants us to see what the early Christians were really like. Contrast Philip with Jonah. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, this lay evangelist went wherever God sent. Philip was on his way to the end of the Palestinian world of that time. South and west of Gaza the desert trailed off across Sinai into Egypt. There was nothing.

8:27-28. Philip was in God's plan again and functioning through the Spirit. Gaza was not the target at all, but rather an Ethiopian eunuch, treasurer to the queen, on his way home from temple worship, presumably in an ox-drawn chariot. Both eunuch and Candace are probably government titles.

In that case the man probably was, like Nicolas in 6:5, a proselyte or full convert to Judaism. This would mean he was a Gentile who had embraced the Jewish religion and Scriptures which he now read. Some commentators believe that because Luke uses both eunuch and the title of treasurer, that the two terms mean different things: physical castration and political office. If that is the case, the Ethiopian could not have been a full participant in temple worship (Deut. 23:1) though he was certainly a full participant in God's promise (Luke 14:12-14).

8:29. How easy we find it to picture Philip plodding southward on that desert road, casually observing the common sight of a foreign visitor returning from Jerusalem and, in the custom of the day, reading aloud, this time from Isaiah 53. What might the evangelist have been thinking? Perhaps mixed emotions—the loneliness of the place, possibly regret at leaving the thriving effort in Samaria, and even a wish that this stranger could really understand the Messiah of whom the prophet had written.

Silent musings appealed neither to Philip nor Luke. This is an action story, and since an ox-drawn vehicle hardly moved at blazing speed, the Spirit can easily say to Philip, "Catch that chariot!"

8:30-31. Philip's question, doubtless placed in his mind by the Holy Spirit, illustrates a basic theme in Luke and Acts—how to find Jesus in the Old Testament. Luke had already written to Theophilus that Jesus is the key to understanding that ancient Scripture (Luke 24:45).

This problem has never disappeared. People caught up in religion of various kinds not only fail to understand the intricacies of their chosen religion, but make no connection between that dogma and God's genuine revelation through the Bible. Has there ever been a better invitation to proclaim the gospel than this? He invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

8:32-33. Imagine the exhilaration in Philip's heart as he realized why the Spirit had sent him to the desert. Here is a good man in need of grace, a serious searcher whose religion had not satisfied his quest for reality. God had prepared not only his heart but his mind. What better Old Testament text from which to preach Jesus than Isaiah 53:7-8. Indeed, it is so dramatic, Luke spells out the verses. This common messianic text in Judaism was hardly interpreted by the rabbis in light of God's suffering servant, an unthinkable concept in first-century Jewish theology.

Jesus had said repeatedly he had not come to wrest power from the Romans and build an earthly kingdom. "The Son of Man had not come to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45) and even to die. This Christian interpretation of Isaiah Philip knew well. He was quite prepared to explain Jesus from this venerable text.

8:34-35. Not only did the eunuch invite Philip to sit with him and explain the text, but he asked the very questions that lead to an introduction of the Savior. Could Philip have begun somewhere in Deuteronomy or Job and explained the new covenant gospel to this man? Quite probably. God made it much easier. Jesus had repeatedly quoted portions of Isaiah 53 as being fulfilled in his death (Matt. 8:17; John 12:38; Luke 22:37), and the disciples certainly passed that information on to the Christians in the early church. With joy Philip explained, and with joy Luke recorded this good man hearing for the first time the good news about Jesus.

Can we conceive of a modern parallel to this incident? Picture yourself waiting in the departure lounge of an airport. A stranger sitting next to you has an open Bible on his lap. He may not be reading aloud, but his finger moves along the lines as he ponders the words. You glance over and discover he's in John 3 rapidly approaching verse 16. God prompts you to speak, and you say something like, "How unusual to find someone reading a Bible in an airport; isn't that third chapter wonderful?" The stranger turns to you and replies, "It is interesting; but I'm stumped on this sixteenth verse. What exactly does it mean to believe in Jesus and have eternal life?" Could you handle that situation without a seminary degree? Any serious Christian would offer a prayer of thanks and plunge in with a simple explanation of the gospel.

8:36-37. We cannot know whether Philip closed his explanation of the gospel with a mention of baptism as he had heard Peter do earlier (2:38). Verse 12 indicates Philip clearly understood that baptism follows faith so he may have done that. Or, as a Jewish proselyte, the eunuch may have understood that when one places faith in God, water baptism symbolizes that internal act.

LUKE 15:1-7

15:3-6. As a shepherd, you care for 100 sheep. One night, one lone sheep wanders from the fold. What do you do? You leave the 99 to fend for themselves in the relative safety of the open field and begin an immediate search-and-rescue mission for the lost sheep. Having found the sheep, you gather all your friends and neighbors and share the good news with them.

15:7. That is what heaven is like. Ninety-nine self-righteous people who keep all the rituals, festivals, and rules bring no joy to heaven. One sinner confessing his sin and repenting sets off celebration. God is concerned about the lost who admit they are lost and turn back to Him. He wants people to put the sinful life behind them and follow Him. Pharisees never do this, because they never realize they are lost. They always count themselves among the saved, even though they have never repented of their sins.

NUMBERS 23:19-23

Balaam told Balak to prepare seven altars for sacrifice as he prepared to receive revelation in the form of oracles from the Lord (see Num. 23:1). Balaam received four oracles from the Lord and the focal verses in this section are from the second oracle (see 23:13-26). Balaam was required to bless rather than to curse God's people.

Verse 19. Forced to prophesy God's truth, Balaam revealed two of the great attributes of God. First, God does not lie. Absolute and pure truth characterizes the nature and revelation of God. This attribute has implications concerning the Bible. All Scripture is God-breathed (see 2 Tim. 3:16), and thus it is without error since God never lies. This divine characteristic is intended to encourage the godly and to warn the wicked. God will surely bless those who are faithful and will punish those who are rebellious. Second, God never changes His mind. The technical term for this attribute is immutability. In His perfection, God was, is, and always will be the same. He does not change or evolve. Thus the moral laws He has revealed don't change either. People cannot change God's moral laws anymore than they can change His physical laws. God is the Supreme Judge, and His judgment is and will be final.

Verse 20. Balaam came to curse the Israelites but instead received a command to bless them. He could not alter God's plan for Israel.

Verse 21. Here Balaam referred to the covenant people as Jacob and as Israel, two names of the Israelites' patriarchal namesake. God promised that He had no plans to bring disaster on the Israelites as they obediently made their way toward the promised land. "The Lord their God is with them" is a key phrase that assured the people of protection and blessing. The apostle Paul later echoed a similar promise of God to Christians: "If God is for us, who is against us?" (Rom. 8:31). Balaam prophesied also about the Israelites' rejoicing over the King among them. There would be no earthly king in Israel for centuries. Thus the reference here was to God as the Ruler of Israel. Adherence to God's laws brought blessing, but disobedience resulted in discipline.

Verse 22. God had miraculously delivered the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt. He had delivered them for His purposes, and He would not allow His plan to be defeated. Ultimately from this nation would come the Promised Messiah, Jesus Christ, who would provide atonement for sins. The phrase horns of a wild ox refer to the sovereign power of God that no one can resist.

Verse 23. Balaam was forced to declare that no magic curse and no divination could harm the Israelites since the Lord God had His hand on them. These two phrases refer to satanic substitutes for true religious practices. They focus on false gods and ultimately on Satan, who inspires them. God's power is infinitely greater than Satan's, and thus God's faithful people have no reason to fear. The Israelites' successes would result in glory to God. In the end all would be forced to acknowledge, "What great things God has done."