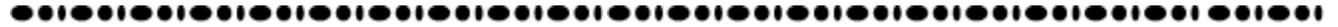


Week Eight

TWO WORDS



TWO WORDS

Two words.

Just two words.

Two words, that when put together, change everything.

Absolutely everything.

They are the epicenter. Put these two words at the center of our lives and everything changes. Nothing escapes their reach. Everything feels their presence.

His presence.

Two words. Just two simple, but profound words.

By now, you know them.

This is not new, but don't read them too quickly. Don't think, "Yes...I know that...that's what we've been doing each week."

Let them soak and simmer.

Let them bounce around awhile.

Let the insights gained throughout this experience weigh in.

Yes, the words are known, but now we see their significance, their resonance, their centrality in our lives.

Often, they're given a nod and wink. Now we know this must not be. Now we see their power. The words are good, yes, but they're more than that.

They're dangerous.

Apply these words and the adventure begins.

It takes courage.

It takes faith.

It takes authenticity.

It all comes down to two words.

Just two words.

Ready?

TWO WORDS

We know them well...

Love God.

Profound simplicity

Would we be more convinced if it came down to a five-hundred-page dissertation rather than two words? Would we be more welcoming? Would we be increasingly ready to embrace the teaching?

There's something profound in the simple. Set the dissertation aside. They have their place. Not here. Just two words.

Love God.

They resonate, do they not? There's something in them. There's something about them. We know there's something infinitely profound in these two words.

They have strength.

They have weight.

They beckon us.

And now they must do more.

Now we must let these two simple but profound words elicit a short but powerful question.

The question also comes in two words. It's a question that inspires vision. This is not a whimsical vision, but a vision only available when we the creation are touched by the Creator.

The question is simple...

What if?

What if we really did it? What if every fiber of our being loved God? What if we genuinely and passionately loved God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? What would life be like? What would life feel like?

That's a powerful question.

We've asked "*What if?*" to other gods. We've dreamed of financial abundance and all it would do for our lives. We've been caught up in thoughts of social or vocational status and the respect we'd have from neighbors and peers. The "*What if?*" question is not new, but have we applied it to the greatest gift of all? Have we wondered and dreamed about our lives set free by love for God? Have we set back in the chair, closed our eyes, and wondered and wished for all that comes from a life with God as our God? When our minds go to neutral, what do we dream about, what do we wonder about, what do we wish would be true of our days? Is God at the center of that vision?

"*What if?*" is a dangerous but appropriate question. Before we apply it to ourselves, let's carry the question to where we've been in Scripture.

WHAT IF DAVID?

David.

We recently considered David's life. We've even read from his journal. What if David displayed a different set of two words? One of the words would have been the same. He would still love something. But what if the blank that followed that love read differently?

Love _____.

What if he loved comfort?

Love for comfort doesn't lead one to square off with a man twice your size.

What if he loved people-pleasing? What if the opinions of his brothers weighed more heavily than the opinion of God?

But his brothers were not pleased. They criticized his desire to take on Goliath, and David pressed on.

Or how about another love, another thing central in David's life? What if David loved his own abilities, his own skills, his own strength?

Love for his own strength would not have inspired him to stand up to a stronger man. Love for his own skills would not have emboldened him to stand up to a seasoned warrior. David loved someone whose strength and skill made Goliath's strength and skill inconsequential.

But what if he didn't? What would have come from David's life?

In truth, we do not know, and we would not know because David would have been forgotten. Along with the nameless warriors who cowered at Goliath's taunts, we'd know nothing of David today. He'd not have shepherded Israel as king. He'd only have shepherded sheep.

All the adventure...gone.

All the influence...gone.

All the inspiration...gone.

Life has challenges. Many of those challenges are simply beyond us. We have limited strength, limited knowledge, limited understanding, limited time. To be human is to be limited.

But tragic is the life lived within those limitations.

Far greater is the life that loves The One Without Limits.

WHAT IF JOSEPH?

Joseph.

We read recently from a scene in Joseph's life. Sold into slavery and working in another man's household, then something happens. Opportunity knocks. The wife of his boss attempts seduction. What if Joseph displayed a different set of two words? One of the words would have been the same. He would still love something. But what if the blank that followed that love read differently?

Love _____.

What if to Joseph sex was not a gift from God but held godlike status in his life? What if Joseph obeyed his sex drive as one might obey God?

TWO WORDS

What would Joseph have gained? What would Joseph have lost?

The gain? One night of pleasure.

The loss? Everything.

God entrusted great things to Joseph because God was central in Joseph's life. Yes, his road was difficult, but it ultimately led to him ruling the land of Egypt and saving the nation of Israel. Sure, he could have had a fling with Potiphar's wife, but if this fling resulted from idolatry of sexual expression, the story of Joseph would read very differently, and likely, we'd not read it at all.

And how about a few descendants of the family Joseph saved?

How about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego?

WHAT IF SHADRACH, MESHACH, AND ABEDNEGO?

Shadrach. Meshach. Abednego.

We recently read from their lives. What if they loved King Nebuchadnezzar as they loved God? What if they loved the pleasures of palace life as they loved God? What if they loved protecting themselves rather than loving a life under God's protection?

How would their story read?

What would they have experienced?

Would we be discussing them thousands of years later?

What would they have missed? What would we have missed?

Talk about an adventure. These three men loved God, and their love for God took them on the wildest of rides.

They were refugees. That's where it started. They were dragged from their homes, their land, their livelihood, and taken to a land not their own. Life was bad...really bad.

They were discovered.

The king took note of them and took them in. They were given royal treatment. They had pleasure and respect. They were the envy of the masses. Life was good...really good.

They were dismissed.

The king's rage at their rebellion was only to be exceeded by the rage of the fire. Their arms were bound. Their legs were bound. Their bodies were dragged. They were pitched into an earthly hell.

They were rescued.

As they walked in the midst of that fire the unseen became manifest. They were not alone. They were never alone. Nothing could stop their lives. The king could not. The guards could not. The fire could not. They were alive in body and soul.

What a story!

What an adventure!

What a life!

TWO WORDS

What if they had missed it? What if they had acquiesced to the king's idolatrous demands? What if they had bowed to the pressures rather than bow to their God?

They would have felt gain.

They would have experienced loss.

Unknown loss. Loss of opportunity. Opportunity to see God at work in their lives. Opportunity to ride the adventure of a life characterized by two words, two simple but profound words.

Love God.

They loved God.

What if we stayed centered?

What if we loved God?

One more.

How about Habakkuk?

WHAT IF HABAKKUK?

Habakkuk?

Yes, we read from his life this week.

He was tired. He was frustrated. He was disillusioned.

Things were not going the way he had envisioned. He'd read the stories of God's amazing work. They inspired him. They moved him. They convinced him that he, too, wanted to be part of God's story.

But he found himself in a desert of sorts. He found himself wishing and waiting, just like countless others who had gone before him. But unlike the crowds, unlike the common response, Habakkuk did something different. Two words would be put on display.

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

That's bold.

That's love for God in full color.

Why would anyone want that?

Why would anyone want a heart faithful to God in the midst of trying circumstances? Why not take the recommendation of Job's wife after he lost his children, his livelihood, and his health: "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9).

Job refused.

Job and Habakkuk lived centered lives. They were centered on something infinitely capable, strong, and enduring.

They were centered on God himself.

TWO WORDS

Every life has degrees of hardship. Every life has deserts. Every life has loss. Every life has seasons where there are no grapes on the vines, where the olive crop fails, and the fields produce no food. Struggle is a reality in life.

The question is not the reality of struggle.

The question is this...

What will be the epicenter of our lives when struggle comes?

What will we do to maintain strength in the midst of struggle?

What will we rest in, stand upon, and cling to?

David wrestled in his journal, but he stayed centered.

Habakkuk struggled, but he stayed centered.

Job grieved, but he stayed centered.

What if we stayed centered?

What if we loved God?

WEAKNESS

It's astounding, but an odd thing happens to those who get this. Consider a stunning statement made by Paul to his friends in Corinth.

That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Delight in weaknesses? Is this man sick?

Not at all. He's alive.

He's made an astounding discovery. It's when he's weak that he gets to see God most clearly. It's when he's in over his head that he discovers a strength that is clearly beyond himself. It's when he most certainly cannot rely on his own competency that he must lean heavily into God. In another place, regarding a time of intense challenge, Paul writes, "*This happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead*" (2 Corinthians 1:9). Paul reveled in his weakness because he reveled in God's strength. Two words characterized his life: Love God. These words were at the epicenter of his being.

OURSELVES

Now we get personal.

Now we get vulnerable.

Now we get uncensored.

It gets a little dangerous at this point.

TWO WORDS

It seems easy and obvious when we turn the pages of the lives of others. We hover over their lives and read of their love or lack of love for God. We watch it all unfold as we turn from page to page in Scripture. The good decisions appear so easy, so clear. The bad decisions seem so foolish, so obvious.

It's one thing to read another person's story.

It's another to be in the midst of writing your own.

Scripture contains life after life, story after story. We read these stories and are both inspired and challenged. We make a mistake, though, if we fail to recognize one incredibly important truth.

The Scriptures are complete, but God's still writing through lives...our lives...your life.

Life after life, story after story, the book of human history continues to be transcribed. Flip to the table of contents. Run your finger down through the names. It will take some time, but you will find it. It's a chapter partially written. It's the story of a person along the way.

It's your story.

How does it read?

What will seem so obvious to readers that may not be obvious to you now?

Wasn't it obvious? Any one of those soldiers could have stood up to Goliath in the strength of God. It took a boy to exercise his love and faith in God. It seems so clear, doesn't it?

Wasn't it obvious? The Israelites had been miraculously brought out of slavery. If God had taken care of them then would he not do so now? It seems so clear, doesn't it?

Again, what will seem so obvious to those who read your story that may not be obvious right now?

What if?

What if you really did it? What if your life was really and truly characterized by two words, two simple but profound words?

What's in the blank?

Love_____.

There are so many things we can write in that blank. Some of them even seem noble. Some of them even seem good.

But are they strong?

Are they capable?

Are they wise?

Are they able to touch all of your life and not just part of your life?

Are they able to give your life a foundation that withstands the storms?

Are they qualified to be your god?

Do you see it?

LET'S DREAM

Let's come full circle. We started with whispered wisdom that set us on a journey.

TWO WORDS

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23).

The heart is the wellspring of life. It is to be carefully considered and guarded at all cost. What's in there? What do we love? What is at the epicenter of our being? What do we treasure? What do we desire? What do we seek? What do we rest upon, stand upon, and cling to?

Which is exactly what we've done.

We have stormed our hearts. We have peeled back the layers to consider this wellspring of life. And we have stormed Scripture. We have peeled back the layers of Scripture to discover Scripture's central theme. It reverberates from one page to the next, and we've discovered it from a multitude of vantage points. It is seen in the lives, the poetry, the prophecies, the teachings, the commands. Page after page, life after life, encounter after encounter, the *Love God* theme resonates and reverberates from this astounding book.

By now we have greater insight into important aspects of these exercises. We are in pursuit of two things:

We are in pursuit of self-awareness: What holds potential to capture the imagination of my heart and distract me from loving God?

We are in pursuit of God-awareness: What would it be like for God to capture the imagination of my heart and truly be central in my life?

And so now it's time to dream.

It's a reality of life. When our minds go to neutral we imagine what life would be like if _____ were true. *What if I had financial abundance? What if I had more time? What if I had a relationship with her? What if I dated or was married to him? What if I had that job? What if I was retired? What if...?* The health of this dreaming is determined by circumstances and perspective, but it's hoped that reflections in this experience have inspired and strengthened another *What if?*

Imagination is not reserved for the more natural *dreamers* in life. Imagination happens in the mind of the artist and the engineer, the poet and the accountant. Something captures our attention. Something captures our minds. Something captures our hearts.

We could not have put this exercise at the beginning of our journey. To do so would have been dangerous. It would have been dangerous because we all have preconceived visions of what it would mean to love God. For some, loving God would be boring. To others, loving God would be dangerous. To others still, loving God would make them someone they really don't want to be.

In light of recent reflections on Scripture, on life, on ourselves, how might we envision what it looks like, feels like, and is like to have an authentic and growing passion for our Creator? It's hoped that the context of this journey has created a fresh and alive perspective of life and of God. So as you turn these pages, let the greater context inform your dreaming. Wonder if a more fervent love for God would set your heart free. Consider if a more genuine love for God might empower you to treasure life's gifts (rather than grip them), to enjoy your work for what it is (rather than despise it for what it's not), to walk peacefully through the midst of life's ebb and flow (rather than be tossed and turned by life's circumstances).

Yes, for some, a genuine love for God will involve radical change in day-to-day experiences. But for others, the day to day will not change on the outside, but it may change entirely on the inside. Yes, for some it means vocational change; their vocation is simply incompatible with a love for God. For others, though, it may not mean vocational change, but it may very well mean a change in perspective on the vocation. Similarly, for some it means financial change; previous idolatry of money is simply

TWO WORDS

incompatible with love for God. For others, though, it may not mean financial change, but it may very well mean a change in perspective on their finances. The categories could go on and on.

Proceed thoughtfully.

Proceed carefully.

Proceed prayerfully.

Leave assumptions behind.

Leave the old imagination behind.

Invigorate a new imagination.

It's time to ask...

What if?

Two Words

Week 8, Reading, p. 178