



## Sermon Transcript September 13, 2015

### Witnesses of the Resurrection Acts 1:1-11

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on September 13, 2015 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).

## Sermon Text

### Acts 1:1-11

<sup>1</sup> In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, <sup>2</sup> until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. <sup>3</sup> He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

<sup>4</sup> And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; <sup>5</sup> for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

<sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” <sup>7</sup> He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” <sup>9</sup> And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup> And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, <sup>11</sup> and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

## Introduction

I can remember sitting down with a gentleman who was coming to our church and he wanted to know more about what it was we believe. And so, quite naturally, I began to share the gospel with him.

As I always do, I started with the fact that we believe there is a God who made all things and that he is a loving God who made us to share his love with us. Consequently, being creatures, we need God and we get the most out of life when we live under God's good rule. God wants to bless us and so the Psalm says, "*Blessed is the man . . . who's delight is in the law of the Lord.*" But we rejected God as the ruler of our lives and we try to live life without God. The problem is, we all make a mess of things. We fail to rule ourselves, our society and this world God has made. And so what is God going to do about this? He won't let us rebel forever. Rather, we have to give an account and there is coming a day of judgment. The Scriptures say, "*It is appointed unto man once to die, and then face the judgment.*" But here is the good news. God loves us so much that he sent his son into the world, the God-man, Jesus. Unlike us, Jesus always lived under God's good rule. When he went to the cross, he took our punishment. The judgment for our sins was placed on Jesus. The penalty for sin is death and Jesus died in our place. Then three days later, this Jesus, the Son of God, rose from the dead. . . .

As soon as I mentioned that Jesus rose from the dead, this man stopped me. I couldn't get another word out of my mouth, before this man put out his hand and asked me to stop. He looked at me and said, "Do you mean to tell me that Jesus rose from the dead?" I said, "yes!" He looked at me rather matter-of-factly, and said, "Well that changes everything. I believe!" I had never seen that happen before. I wanted to say, "But I am not done with my presentation!" But with simple faith, this man was acknowledging a truth that holds our faith together. Paul put it this way in 1 Corinthians 15:14, "*If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.*" In other words, if Jesus has not risen from the dead, everything we are doing this morning and everything we are putting our faith in and confessing to be true, would be worthless. But, if he did rise from the dead, then that truly does change everything.

That is the essence of the verse you are going to memorize this week, 1 Peter 1:3. "*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.*" Do you see what this verse is saying? Because Jesus has risen from the dead, we don't have a "hope-so hope." We have a sure and "*living hope.*" We have an "*inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you.*" How

so? Jesus rose from the dead! That is what Luke is telling us at the end of his account of the life of Jesus in Luke 24. Because Jesus died on the cross and rose again, we can “*proclaim the forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations.*” How is it that we can assure people that their sins can be forgiven? It is because Jesus has risen from the dead. There is no good news to share this morning if Jesus did not rise from the dead. John Stott said it this way, “Christianity is in its very essence a resurrection religion. The concept of the resurrection lies at its heart. If you remove it, Christianity is destroyed.”<sup>1</sup>

It is with this in mind, I want to introduce to you where we are going for the next ten weeks. We are going to make our way through the Book of Acts. It is the second book written by Luke. You can see by what it says in verse 1 that there is a previous book Luke wrote. He says in Acts 1:1, “*In the first book . . .*” The first book written by Luke is the book that bears his name, the Gospel of Luke. We discover in verse 1 that the focus of the first book was the life of Jesus. He says of the first book, the Gospel of Luke, “*I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up.*” And that is exactly how the Gospel of Luke ends. It says in Luke 24:51, “*While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven.*” And so in Luke’s second book, the book of Acts, we pick up the story from there. In Acts 1:9 we read of Jesus, “*And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.*” This second book written by Luke starts where the first book ended; the ascension of Jesus.

It is commonly held that Acts 1:8 gives us the introductory outline for the entire book. Here Jesus says, “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*” And that is exactly what unfolds for us in the book of Acts. Starting in Acts 2, the apostles bear witness to the resurrected Jesus in Jerusalem. In Acts 8 this good news of the resurrection of Jesus makes its way to Samaria. In Acts 10 it goes to the Gentiles when Peter bears witness to the house of Cornelius. Then we have recorded for us, the three missionary journeys of Paul, as he bears witness to the risen Jesus throughout Asia Minor. And the book ends with Paul in the city of Rome, where he is bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus in front of King Agrippa.

Some say, that the book of Acts is the “Acts of the Apostles” as they bear witness to the resurrected Jesus from Jerusalem to Rome. Others say, “No, this is the “Acts of the Holy Spirit who empowers them to bear witness from Jerusalem to Rome.” They were told to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit who will give them power to bear witness to the risen Jesus. I would take it one step further and say that Acts is “the Acts of the Lord Jesus, through his people, by the Holy Spirit, for the accomplishment of God’s

purposes.”<sup>2</sup> So in his first book, Luke tells us what Jesus “*began to do and teach.*” It is “Volume One of the Acts of Jesus.” In this second book, we have “Volume Two of the Ongoing Acts of the risen Jesus who reigns over all things.” It is the beginning of the story of what the risen and reigning Jesus is doing in this world right now.

So here is what we are going to do as we make our way through Acts. We are going to make our way through the book of Acts by looking at the sermons recorded for us in this book. In doing this, we are going to discover something about the message of the early church. “The resurrection of Jesus is the climax and focus of the sermons in Acts.”<sup>3</sup> This is what we are bearing “witness” to. This Jesus who died, has risen from the dead. Which brings us to the second point we are going to focus on in this series. If Jesus has risen from the dead, it truly does change everything. It changes our lives. Adrian Warnock puts it this way, “A Christian is someone who believes in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ and lives in light of the implications of that event.”<sup>4</sup> And so as we make our way through the story of “the ongoing Acts of the Risen Jesus” we don’t want to miss the many ways this truth shapes and defines our lives. It truly does change everything. I believe it can change your life.

## **A Witness to the Resurrection**

What does it mean to be a “witness” for Jesus? We have already seen that the theme verse for the book of Acts is Acts 1:8. It is here where Jesus says to his disciples, “*you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*” And as we already noticed, this is how the book unfolds. It shows how the good news of Jesus moves from Jerusalem to Rome. And yet the constant, no matter where the apostles find themselves geographically, is that in every place they go they are to be a “witness.” That is the constant throughout the book of Acts.

So what does it mean to be a “witness” for Jesus? I can imagine that there are various things that come to mind that encompass what it means to be a “witness” for Christ wherever we go. Part of being a “witness” may include sharing your story of how you came to faith in Jesus. There is power in that personal testimony and the change that Jesus has brought to your life. Part of our “witness” is how we live our lives in front of others. So our witness is not confined to just what we say, but it is also demonstrated in how we live. No doubt, all of this is part of what it means to be a “witness” for Jesus.

But here is what I discovered as I prepared for this series. In the context of the Book of Acts, to be a “witness” for Jesus has a more narrow focus. In a very specific way, these first century followers of Jesus Christ were to give witness to the fact that this Jesus who

died has risen from the dead. They are giving witness to what they saw with their own eyes. This is why it says in Acts 1:3, *“He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.”* And so at the heart of their “witness” to Jesus Christ is the fact that they have witnessed his resurrection from the dead. And this is the focus of their message as they make their way from Jerusalem to Rome. Alan Thompson says it this way, “The term “witness” or “testify” in Acts frequently has to do not with what we might describe as personal testimony of what God has done in our lives, but with actual ‘witness’ or ‘sight’ of the risen Lord Jesus.”<sup>5</sup> They are giving witness to what they actually saw with their own eyes. They saw the risen Jesus.

We have already seen the connection between the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. These two volumes contain for us the beginning and the continuing work of Jesus Christ in this world. At the end of Luke, we hear the risen Jesus saying to his disciples, *“You are witnesses of these things.”* Well, “what things?” Two verses prior to this, it says, *“that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead.”* This is what they are a witness to. They saw him die on the cross. They were there. They saw him three days later, alive! And he appeared to them at various times over forty days.

This was so critical to what it meant for them to be a witness for Christ that the key qualification of the one who replaced Judas is found in Acts 1:21-22. *“So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until they day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.”* In other words, this Matthias, who replaced Judas and was now numbered among the twelve apostles was also an eye-witness to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, remained the focus of the witness of the apostles as they moved from Jerusalem to Rome. The scenery may have changed, but the testimony remained the same. Just consider these verses as we make our way through the book of Acts.

Acts 2:32 - *“This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.”*

Acts 3:15 - *“And you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.”*

Acts 4:33 - *“And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”*

Acts 5:30-32 - *“The God of our fathers raised Jesus . . . and we are witnesses to these things.”*

- Acts 10:39-41 - *“And we are witnesses of all that he did . . . They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.”*
- Acts 13:30-31 - *“But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people.”*
- Acts 22:14-15 - Speaking of Paul’s conversion, *“The God of our Fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth [the resurrected Christ whom he was persecuting]; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard.”*
- Acts 26:16 - Again, speaking of Paul’s conversion, *“But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you [again, the risen Christ] for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you.”*

In the context of the book of Acts, to bear witness to Jesus Christ meant to give testimony that this Jesus who was crucified has indeed risen from the dead. This is instructive to us. I believe your personal testimony and your personal lifestyle are important to bearing witness to Jesus. But at the core to bearing witness to Jesus Christ is the testimony that the one who was crucified has indeed risen from the dead.

Paul said it this way in 1 Corinthians 15:3-11, *“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. . . . Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.”* Do you see the emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus in what Paul considers to be of *“first importance.”* When we bear witness to Jesus we are bearing witness to the testimony that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead.

I was speaking recently with a college professor who is teaching a class on Christianity at a state college. His first assignment to his students was to have them read the gospel of Luke. And then he told them this, “Before you dismiss the claims of Christianity, you must have a response to the central claim of this faith. Did Jesus rise from the dead? You need to form an intelligent response to the central claim upon which the whole

thing rises or falls. If you don't think he rose from the dead, then you can dismiss the whole thing, because without the resurrection of Jesus we have nothing. But, if in examining the evidence, you come to conclude that he did rise from the dead, it is a game changer. If Jesus rose from the dead, it changes everything!

### **Three Observations on the Resurrection of Jesus**

So here we are two thousand years later and does this message of Jesus risen from the dead still hold true? I like the way Eric Metaxas poses this question. Rather poetically he writes, "The real defeat of Death hangs on an event as implausible as anything imaginable: In a hewn rock tomb just outside Jerusalem, the cosmos itself . . . pivoted and reversed course, undoing the curse of Death that had been upon us since the Garden of Eden. Is this a beautiful myth, or did something miraculously literally happen?"<sup>6</sup>

To answer this question, I would like to point out that belief in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is a reasonable conclusion after considering all the facts. Secondly, the evidence we have is reliable. And finally, the resurrection of Jesus is just as relevant in 2015 to our witness of Jesus as it was with those who saw Jesus with their eyes and touched him with their hands. It really did happen!

The Resurrection of Jesus is Reasonable: In fact, I don't know how else you explain the rise of Christianity apart from the resurrection of Jesus. N. T. Wright emphatically says that "the only possible explanation for the rise of Christianity and for its taking the shape it did was that Jesus of Nazareth, three days after being very thoroughly dead (Roman executioners were professional killers and didn't let would-be rebel leaders slip out of their clutches), was found by his followers to be thoroughly and very bodily alive again."<sup>7</sup> Did they see an apparition of Jesus, a ghost-like figure? But it had to be more than that, the tomb was empty. Some suggest they stole the body, which would have been a herculean task considering that the tomb was sealed and heavily guarded. Some suggest they fabricated the whole thing, which could have been easily foiled by producing the body of Jesus. And furthermore, many of them were martyred for their unswerving belief in the resurrection of Jesus.

Gary Habermas says that ancient historians, irrespective of their belief about the resurrection of Jesus, generally agree that these things are true about the early development of the Christian faith.

1. Jesus died by crucifixion and was buried
2. The death of Jesus caused the disciples to despair, believing that his life had ended



3. Most concur that the tomb was empty a few days later
4. The disciples believed they saw the risen Jesus
5. The disciples were transformed from doubters to boldly proclaiming his resurrection
6. The resurrection of Jesus was the center of the preaching of the early church
7. The message was proclaimed in Jerusalem first, the very place where he was crucified shortly before
8. From this message the church was born<sup>8</sup>

It is hard to imagine any group fabricating a resurrection story within a few years of the death of their founder, let alone 40 to 50 days after the crucifixion of their leader and in the very place where he had been publically executed and buried. And yet, that is the very message that gave birth to the church in the city of Jerusalem. And like an uncontained fire, within one generation it spread all the way to Rome. I know I am biased, but I think it is less reasonable to not believe in the resurrection than to believe in it. Spurgeon said, "The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is one of the best attested facts on record."<sup>9</sup> He goes on to say that the sheer number of witnesses, the implausibility that they would all be part of a hoax and that no one would break from their ranks when they received all kinds of suffering because of their testimony speaks to the overwhelming conclusion that our faith has a solid base.

And yet, even though it is reasonable, the most sure testimony of all is the testimony of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that causes us to believe. This is greater than any rational argument. We see in our text that the disciples were to wait for the Holy Spirit to come and then they would have power to be witnesses for Christ. Don't forget the verse you are going to memorize this week, "*According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope.*" Yes, it is the work of the Spirit, but I also want you to see that our faith is "reasonable." Matters of faith are not leaps of faith. We are not checking our brain at the door when we come in and sit in these pews. The truths we believe are reasonable. And at the same time, faith itself is a work of the Spirit of God. But how else can you explain what we are doing here two thousand years later apart from the truth of the resurrection of Jesus.?

The Resurrection of Jesus is Reliable: By reliable I mean that the resurrection of Jesus serves as a firm foundation of everything else we believe. I said earlier that because of the resurrection of Jesus, we don't have a "hope-so hope." Rather, we have a certain hope. As Peter puts it, we have "*a living hope*" because our hope is not found in an idea, but in a living person. It is reliable. You can put the full weight of your faith and trust in Jesus and it will hold you. You don't have to be tentative. You don't have to just tip

your toes in the pool of faith. You can put the full weight of trust and faith in Jesus because the resurrection of Jesus tells us that he is reliable.

I like the way Sam Storms says it. He writes, “I can honestly say that I have staked my life on an empty tomb. Everything I am, everything I own, everything I have done or do hangs suspended on whether or not Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead. The decision I made decades ago to put my trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is only as good as the empty tomb. If Jesus didn’t rise from the dead, my life is a sham. I’ve invested everything in, staked everything on, entrusted everything to the historical fact of the empty tomb of Jesus. If his body and bones are still buried somewhere in Palestine, or have long since disintegrated under the force of time and the laws of physics, nothing has meaning for me, nor do I have meaning for anything or anyone else.”<sup>10</sup>

The resurrection of Jesus is reliable. It puts everything else in order. As we will see over the weeks to come, the resurrection of Jesus tells me that Jesus is Lord of all. It also tells me that God is working out his purposes out in this world through Jesus. There is a little Greek word that gets repeated 40 times in Luke and Acts, over half of the time it is used in Acts. It is the word that means “*it is necessary*.” It is used to explain what God is doing in this world through Jesus Christ. It is a word that assures us that God is working out his plan and the resurrection of Jesus was central to that plan and it has ushered in a new age. We even see this in Acts 1:8. Here Jesus says to his disciples “*You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*” As the book of Acts unfolds, that is exactly what happened and it continues to spread in the year of our Lord, 2015. The resurrection of Jesus is reliable. Acts 1:11 speaks to this when it says, “*This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.*” He will return.

The Resurrection of Jesus is Relevant: We are still his witnesses. The charge given by the resurrected Jesus to his disciples was not just for that first generation of disciples. We are his witnesses here in Wethersfield, the Greater Hartford Region, New England and to the ends of the earth. Remember, this book of Acts is Volume 2 of the ongoing acts of the risen Jesus who reigns over all things. To some degree, this book is still being written as we bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and as others find hope and forgiveness in Jesus. There is power in the name of Jesus.

Charles Featherstone was there, right across from the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. He was married to a Christian woman who was faithful in loving him. He writes, “As I looked up at the burning twin towers and watched people tumble to their deaths, life changing words came to me—words I suddenly heard inside my head: *My*

*love is all that matters and this is who I am.* I knew then that everything I understood about God, about sin and redemption, about the whole human condition, had changed. I had no idea, in that moment or the days that immediately followed, who had spoken to me or what those words meant. I just knew that the world was now a different place. . . . This wasn't an act of reason on my part. What happened was a cataclysm, the kind of divine intervention that drove Abraham to leave home, trusting in God's promises. I told my wife, 'I think we should find a church.' We did. It was here that the people showed me that it was the risen Jesus Christ who had spoken to me. In word, song and deed, they taught me the gospel, the story of God walking among us, proclaiming the forgiveness of sins for the entire world and calling his disciples to continue to proclaim that good news."<sup>11</sup> The resurrection of Jesus is as relevant today as it was in Acts 1.

## Conclusion

My prayer for this series is that we would recommit ourselves to bearing witness to the truth that Jesus has indeed risen from the dead. And may it be more than a creed we espouse. Rather, may it impact the way we live because it is a truth that changes everything. May the acts of the risen Savior who reigns over all things still be accomplished through us until Jesus returns.

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<sup>1</sup>John Stott, cited in Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007) 131

<sup>2</sup>Alan J Thompson *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011)

<sup>3</sup>Ibid

<sup>4</sup>Adrian Warnock *Raised With Christ: How the Resurrection Changes Everything* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010) 19-20

<sup>5</sup>Thompson

<sup>6</sup>Eric Metaxas *Miracles* (New York: Dutton, 2014)

<sup>7</sup>N.T. Wright *Simply Jesus* (Harper Collins, [www.harpercollins.com](http://www.harpercollins.com), 2011) 192-193

<sup>8</sup>Gary Habermas *The Historical Jesus* (Joplin: College Press, 1996) 158

<sup>9</sup>C. H. Spurgeon, *Sermon No. 66*, "The Resurrection of the Dead" delivered on February 17, 1856, at New Park Street Chapel, Southwark: [www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0066.htm](http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0066.htm)

<sup>10</sup>Sam Storms "What If Christ Is Not Risen? - Part 1"; <http://enjoyinggodministries.com/article/35>

<sup>11</sup>Charles Featherstone "From Jihad to Jesus" *Christianity Today* July/August 2015

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## COMMUNITY GROUPS



### Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Reflecting on the summer, share one of the following (or both).  
A highlight: A disappointment:
2. As you get started as a group, spend some time talking about how you want to function as a group. What are some things everyone is willing to commit to over the next ten weeks?
3. What is one thing you are taking from Sunday's sermon?



### Diving Into The Word

4. Read Luke 24:44-53 and Acts 1:1-11. Discuss how the word "witnesses" is used in these two passages.

What did it mean for the disciples to be a "witness"? (See also Acts 1:22; 4:33; 1 John 1:1-4)  
How does this help us understand what it means for us to be a "witness"?  
(See also 1 Cor. 15:3-4)

5. In Acts 1:3 we read of "many proofs" to the resurrection of Jesus. Some of them are listed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:5-11. What are they?

It is "reasonable" to conclude that Jesus has risen from the dead. As a group, come up with at least five "proofs" of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

6. Read Acts 1:8 and discuss how this verse should give us confidence to bear witness to Jesus.  
How does this verse "guarantee" that the good news of Jesus will advance as God's people bear witness to Jesus?  
How does this encourage you to share your faith?  
What challenges do you need to overcome in order to give witness to Jesus?
7. Read 1 Peter 1:3 and discuss how the resurrection is a "living hope." (See also 1 Peter 1:4, 8)  
"Joy" is the bi-product of the "living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." What can you do to live in that joy?



### Taking It Home

8. As we begin this series on the book of Acts, begin by asking God to show your group how together you can reach out to others. Don't talk about it. Don't strategize. Just begin by praying and asking God to lead you.
9. How would you like to personally grow in the area of being a witness for Jesus?
10. Would you be willing to make the commitment to memorize 1 Peter 1:3 by next week? Give it a try! Encourage each other towards this end.