

Lake Cities Community Church
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Bible Numbers: Making Them Count

SEVEN
God's Perfect Plans

Do any of you remember a Bible Study a few years ago based on *The Andy Griffith Show*? You would watch an episode and then discuss Barney's pride or Opie's latest dilemma and how they reflect Scriptural principles. Well that got me to thinking – "If I was going to create a Bible Study based on a TV show it would have to be, "The Gospel According to the A-Team!"

If you have never seen the A-Team it is about Murdock, B.A., Face and Hannibal four falsely accused soldiers of fortune seeking redemption by helping innocent people out of their trouble. Are not those great biblical themes? My favorite part of the show, though, is when they are stuck in an old barn with a roll of duct tape, a blow torch and an old school bus, and somehow they manage to create a tank with a flamethrower – just what they need to accomplish their mission. And the show ends the leader Hannibal Smith saying, "I love it when a plan comes together." And that phrase reminds me of the number seven.

We are continuing this morning in our study of Bible Numbers. We have looked at the numbers one, two, three and six, and today we come to the number seven.

Brief Introduction to the Number Seven

Before we get to our Scripture passages I would like to give you a brief overview. The number seven is arguably the most important number in the Bible. It dominates the

pages of Scripture from the seven days of creation in Genesis to the seven seals, bowls and trumpets in Revelation. It occurs approximately 600 times in Scripture and could certainly generate in and of itself its own sermon series. It is frequently found in the Old Testament law and the sacrificial system, it permeates Israel's history with many important events happening on the 7th day, the 7th month, 7th week or the 7th year and is central to the study of end times – occurring 37 times in the book of Revelation.

Even those skeptical of the study of Bible numbers admit this number is different. One such skeptic, John Davis wrote: "It is the view of this writer that the only number used symbolically in the Scripture to any degree with discernable significance, is the number 7." (Davis, *Bible Numerology*, 116). It is clear that God has put much weight on this number.

Theologically, the number seven often represents the perfection or completeness. The root of the Hebrew word for seven means "abundance, perfection" (BDAG) and so it is no surprise that this number has come to represent the perfection of God.

From this overview you can see one's challenge in preaching a sermon on the number. What do you leave out? Include? I finally decided to look at three stories in Scripture, each from very different time periods, having different subjects from different authors, but all dominated by the number seven. And inasmuch as the number seven reflects God's perfection, each of these stories will communicate to us something of God's perfect plan for our lives, because God's love it when His plans comes together!

1) SEVEN reflecting God's Perfect Plans... They require much from us.

Let's begin with our first story, found in the New Testament Matthew chapter 18. It is a very short interaction that Jesus has with his disciples and the topic that comes forward is that of forgiveness. It is dominated by the number seven.

Matt. 18:21 Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Matt. 18:22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

In essence Peter – probably on behalf of the disciples - asks: "What is your plan in the area of forgiveness? Let me suggest a rather generous proposal – that a wrongdoer might be forgiven up to seven times." Peter is viewing himself as big-hearted and generous with this suggestion. One commentator gives this background, "In rabbinic discussion the consensus was that a brother might be forgiven a repeated sin three times; on the fourth, there is no forgiveness" (Expositor's Bible Commentary). Peter had more than doubled what was the normal standard of tolerance for sin. But it was more than that, by using the number seven, Peter is saying that his standard would represent *perfect* forgiveness and grace.

Jesus' response draws from the book of Genesis where a man named Lamech compares his sin to that of Cain's. Jesus said, "OK Peter if you want to play with the number seven – how about if you forgive 7 + 7 + 7 + 7 + 7 + 7 + 7 + 7 + 7... 70 times seven." And Jesus' point is not that 490 is the right answer, but that there is no limit to your requirement to forgive someone else.

In terms of God's perfect plans for you and I, what I draw from this passage is that God's perfect plans require much from us. We have a saying, "Fool me one, shame on you.

Fool me twice – shame on me. Three strikes and your are out!” In fact if someone has wronged you over and over – and you forgive them over and over and over, at some point the forgiver seem irresponsible.

But isn't that just like God's grace? And aren't you glad that God does not put a limit on how many times He will forgive you? Aren't you glad that Jesus doesn't listen to the Devil when he says, “You are not going to forgive him again are you? That is crazy! Just give him to me...”

Whether it is in the area of forgiveness, or service, or giving or loving each other – God always requires His children to go above and beyond. Jesus has high expectations from his followers – he requires much.

I was invited by the Rowlett Police Chief, Matt Walling, to attend a Rotary Club meeting two weeks ago, and had a great time. The people were wonderful and the program interesting. Then he has asked me to consider joining the Rowlett Rotary Club; and they do much good work. But I am already so busy with the church and family, and am involved in the Chamber of Commerce. So I am planning on meeting with the Chief to, honestly, explore given my commitments, what is the smallest commitment I could make in terms of time, resources and energy.

And unfortunately, that is how many people approach their faith. What is the minimum number of hours I have to put in, the smallest number of times I have to put up with something? But that is not biblical Christianity. God's perfect plan, as seen in the specific area is forgiveness, applies to all areas – Jesus requires much from his followers.

2) SEVEN reflecting God's Perfect Plans... They often Don't Make Sense to Us.

Let's turn now to our second story – which found in the Old Testament – Joshua chapter six – the battle for the City of Jericho. You will recall that Joshua comes upon the fortified city and is not sure how to handle it – so he inquires to the Lord for help. God gives Him some rather odd advice.

Josh. 6:3 “You shall march around the city, all the men of war circling the city once. You shall do so for six days. Josh. 6:4 “Also seven priests shall carry seven trumpets of rams’ horns before the ark; then on the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. Josh. 6:5 “It shall be that when they make a long blast with the ram’s horn, and when you hear the sound of the trumpet, all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people will go up every man straight ahead.”

Everything culminates in the seventh day. Seven priests, seven trumpets, seven times around the city. This reminds me so much at the A-Team – a dramatic, colorful, loud plan which is fun to watch, but you secretly know is impossible in real life. In the ancient world there were four and only four ways to get into a walled city: Going over with ladders, digging a tunnel underneath, smashing a hole through the wall with a battering ram or laying siege and starve them out. That's it.

It is kind of like, let's say you wanted to reduce your electricity bill in these hot summer months and so you go to a normal friend who says you have four options: you can either turn up your thermostat, put more insulation in your attic, install a radiant barrier, or purchase a more efficient system. But then you go to your second mystical friend who

says I know just what to do: “Dress up like a clown, with a big red nose, spin around seven times and at the top of each hour for seven hours singing Yankee Doodle and your bill will be cut in half.” That must have been just how foolish God’s plan appeared to Israel.

The story of Jericho reminds us that **God’s perfect plans sometimes do not make sense to us**. That is true isn’t it? Sometimes God’s way of accomplishing noble goals are rather strange to us. But in Bible the stranger the plan the more likely it is that God is behind it. No one understood for example, that the death of Jesus would result in the salvation of the world. But it did. God’s does work in mysterious ways.

I think of Tim and Jenny heading clearly to be missionaries in Japan, but yet God has sent Tim away for a year with the Navy, and they have faced other challenges that are not found in the “Seven step to get to the mission field,” brochure. But we take encouragement in that -- because the unusual path may well indicate God is doing something great in our midst!

The stories I love to tell about our church are how God has worked in some very odd ways. In our first 18 months we moved from a bowling alley to a movie theatre to a child care center, back to the bowling alley and finally to this school. Moving over and over in your first year so as to keep potential visitors guessing where to find us is not to be found in the “Seven successful strategies for church planting” seminar. Yet it was exactly God’s plan for us.

My favorite quote on the story of Joshua and Jericho is from the Expositor’s Bible Commentary: “The conquest of Jericho was more than a military campaign; it was a religious event.” (Donald H. Madvig, EBC). That’s it. Going to Japan, planting a church, raising your kids, going to work everyday these things are really not about going to Japan,

planting a church, raising kids or working – they are about worshiping God and giving Him glory – especially when he requires us to live by faith, because His plans don't make sense.

SEVEN reflecting God's Perfect Plans... Results in our Refreshment

God's perfect plans – as seen through these “number seven” stories require much from us – there are high expectations in Christianity, and to make it even more challenging often times God designs his plans in such a way that they don't make sense to us and we have to trust Him.

Our third and final story goes back to the very beginning. Back to Genesis chapter 2. The first mention of the number seven is founding the story of creation: **Gen. 2:2 By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Gen. 2:3 Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work - which God had created and made.**

The first two stories we have studied were both challenging and overwhelming – that God requires much from us and that sometime He work beyond our understanding - but in this third story we can take great comfort our third less is that... “God's perfect plans–result in our refreshment.” As set up in the creation itself we see there is a time to work and there is *a time to rest.*

I have heard many sermons regarding the Sabbath that argue that God didn't need the rest, and he only modeled rest for you and I. But doesn't the text tell us that God Himself rested. **For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor, and was refreshed.**” (Exodus 31:17) Now I understand that God was not out of

breath, but God rested, and in his rest he was refreshed! If this is true for God, how much more for you and I?

The command to you and I is simply this: [Ex. 23:12](#) “Six days you are to do your work, **but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor** (Why? What is the reason?) **in order that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your female slave, as well as your stranger, may refresh themselves.** Hey – the animals need a break. The people need to refresh themselves. Reenergize. Work hard and then rest.

God’s perfect plans result in our refreshment. Or we might say it this way: “God’s perfect plans won’t burn us out.” God’s perfect plans require a lot, sometimes are difficult to understand, but if we submit to God’s plan for our lives we will be at peace, rested and refreshed in Him.

But, of course, while this is so encouraging most of us find it difficult to apply. I read some research a few years ago at Dallas Theological Seminary that found in a survey of 7,400 DTS alumni that 3,000 were no longer involved in vocational Christian work (that’s 40%). A major reason was burnout. Burn out comes when we either work in our own strength or we refuse to take breaks.

The late Jerry Falwell said, “ I work 6:00 a.m. to midnight, seven days a week.” That is not something to be proud of! Many us are tempted to fall into that same pattern.

Many of us hear that much is required of us – and we say, “Great! Bring it on. I want to spend myself for the sake of the gospel!” And then we hear, “God’s plans often won’t make sense to you,” and we say, “Great – I love surprises and adventure – I’m ready to follow God wherever He leads!” But when God says, “Hey take one day off a week and relax, refresh yourself – we say, “No thanks. I don’t need it.”

Conclusion

Let me close with the following story. By the end of 1867, missionary pioneer Hudson Taylor was stressed out. He had 34 full time missionaries on the field in 8 separate stations in China. This was at a time when other evangelical missionary societies were sending fewer missionaries to China because of a lack of funds and there was a constant threat of danger. Hudson Taylor knew that God required much from his followers; and He knew that God's plans were sometimes wrapped in great mystery. But he had not learned to rest. On biographer wrote: "He walked in utter dissatisfaction within himself. He could see so much defeat, discontent and lack of rest."

It was not until two years later in 1869 that Taylor finally learned that God's perfect plans resulted in rest and refreshment. "He entered a rest of faith," and the rest of his life is characterized by peace and joy. He finally gave his burdens to God and learned to trust on God's strength and not his own. He wrote the following quote to you and I:

"To every toiling, heavy-laden sinner, Jesus says, 'Come to me and rest.' But there are many toiling, heavy-laden believers, too. For them this same invitation is meant. Note well the words of Jesus, if you are heavy-laden with your service, and do not mistake it. It is not, 'Go, labor on,' as perhaps you imagine. On the contrary, it is stop, turn back, 'Come to me and rest.' (James Hudson Taylor - [James Hudson Taylor Biography](#)).

God's perfect plans, as seen in these stories - dominated by the number seven have taught us that He requires much from us. And sometimes his plans do not make any sense to us. But Jesus said his yoke is easy and his burden light. True followers of Christ endure much, yet with plenty of rest, peace and joy. Let's pray.