

Lake Cities Community Church
Pastor Craig Schill
Series: Bible Numbers – Making Them Count
August 1, 2010

“THREE”

Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts!

Review

Before we begin, I would like to take just a few minutes to review what we have studied so far as we enter our fourth week in this series on Bible Numbers. In the introduction I asked whether Bible number are “fringe theology – or whether there was any substance to the study. I reviewed many of the ways Bible numbers have been abused over the years resulting a bad reputation, which has resulted in their neglect in modern times. I explained my goal for this study in one word – do you remember what it was? Hermeneutics. We study Bible numbers so we can study the Bible. Two points to keep in mind: First nearly $\frac{1}{4}$ of all verses in the Bible contain a reference to a number. Second, it is clear that in the Ancient World, they viewed and used number differently than we do - often with a figurative, rhetorical meaning that we often miss.

Two weeks ago we began with the number one. The number one is used in the Scripture to communicate individuality, unity and primacy. Individuality – that we are created in God’s image as individuals with worth and value. Jesus seeks the one lost sheep until it is found. Unity - that one is not only found in one, but in many. The church is one body, even as it has many individual members. Primacy – that in a ranking – God is Number One! We share God’s character in terms of individuality and unity, but not in primacy. God alone is first and therefore our position is last – which is our first place.

Last week we studied the number TWO, which represents division. We do not have one, but two – and what do you do with two? We saw that two can easily devolve into division and conflict (that is the natural course of sin). Or, God can take two and make them one again. Husband and wife – become one flesh. Jew and Gentile merged into one new man in Jesus Christ. The power of the gospel is taking two things that look like they do not in any way belong together and forging them in to a synergistic new creation.

And this morning we come to the number three. Are you ready? Let's pause to pray before we begin.

Introduction:

I am going to show you five pictures, and it is your job to figure out what they have in common: (1) A baseball batter at the plate, (2) a girl and her birthday cake, (3) A tiger on the hunt, (4) A very pregnant woman and (5) runners in their starting block. Did you see any common theme in these five photos? All of these pictures show great anticipation. And the anticipation is so physical! The batter is about to swing at the next pitch. The girl has drawn in her breath to blow out those candles. The tiger is a moment away from leaping onto its prey. Very soon this woman will have a new baby in her arms and the runners are listening for only three words: "Ready! Set! Go!!" Anticipation – each are prepared for what is coming next in their lives.

And so let me ask you – "Are you prepared for what is coming next in your life? Are you ready physically, emotionally and spiritually for what God is about to drop in your lap?" You know as Christians we are to live lives of preparation and anticipation. "Be prepared to give an account for the hope that is within you. Be prepared to give an account

to God – for you don't know how long your life will be. Be prepared for Jesus' return. Be prepared for God's work in your life today." The question isn't whether or not God has something special and important for you to do. The question is whether you are anticipating that work and are preparing yourself for it.

And did you know that anticipation is a major theme of the number three? I have been overwhelmed with how God uses the number three in the Bible. I am so excited to share what I have learned with you! What I found is that there are two major ways the number two is used. First to communicate perfection which we will talk about first, and second, anticipation (which we have been talking about). We will talk about those and end, as we usually do, with some application.

The Number Three – PERFECTION

First, as I said, the number three, in the Bible, communicates perfection. Other words that we could use are complete, full and final. I like to think of 3 as being, very often, just the right number.

The use of the number three in this way may come from its own normal meaning. When you move from one to two to three, there is now a movement and spatial relationships. Stories have a beginning, middle and end. Complete story. Time has a past, present and future. One leg on a stool is not that helpful – but three is just right.

But I think not only does this idea of perfection come from the normal meaning of the word, but I believe it also comes from the fact that God Himself is TRINITY - three persons –Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Godhead is complete and full and that perfection of the Trinity, as it were, seems to spill out in the number three in many places. When the

Angels wanted to communicate his Holiness – one was not enough, two was OK, but three was perfect – God is **completely and perfectly holy**. Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts.

When God had to decide how many times the men of Israel were to appear before Him? Three times was just the perfect number. Daniel prayed three times a day. David bowed before Jonathan three times to signify his complete love and loyalty. And when Israel petitioned Pharaoh to make a sacrifice, they planned a three days journey. One is too close, two is Ok, but three is just right- the perfect distance. In heavenly Jerusalem, there will be three gates to the north, three to the south, three to the east and three to the West. The perfect city.

Now some of you at this point might want to say, “Wait!! You are just making things up.” And before I began to study this number I may have agreed with you. But these are just a few of dozens and dozens of examples, and so often when any number could have been used, three is chosen. And that, from a Bible study point of view, gives one pause to consider why. Let me give you a few more examples.

In the new Testament when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness – how many times was He tempted? Three times. The rhetorical impact is that Jesus was fully tested, and faced the perfect storm of temptation. And how many times did he overcome? Three times – he scored a perfect victory, giving us hope. Peter denied Christ how many times? Three times. The original readers would not just have said, *“Oh three – well at least it wasn’t four!”* Not at all! They would have thought – “Oh no – three – a complete and utter denial.” To deny someone once is bad, twice is serious – but three is a complete apostasy. And when Peter was restored – how many times did Jesus ask, “Peter do you love me?” Three times. Peter completely abandoned Christ and was completely restored.

I don't have time to mention when God gave Peter the dreams that previously unclean animals were now OK to eat. How many times did he have that vision? Three times – confirming the perfect new plan of God. I don't have time to mention that Paul, when he received the thorn in his flesh prayed three times for its removal. He felt with three prayers he had then fully given it to God in fullness and left it with Him.

Perfection, complete, full – over and over again. Now I am not saying that there is any magic power in the number three – I'm not saying that you ought to do three jumping jacks when you get up, and have three pieces of toast for breakfast. That is not my point. But in terms of hermeneutics - when you study the Bible, and when the number three comes across the page, your antenna should rise up and realize what might be being communicated.

Now I will say, in passing, if you are looking for a number, or period of time - three is not a bad one to choose. If you have a big, game changing decision to make. Why not commit to *praying about it for three days*? If you want to express your love to your spouse try emphasizing your love with three elements, which will be meaningful if you both have the background of what three is meant to communicate.

The Number Three – ANTICIPATION

The number three often reflects perfection or completion. Secondly, the number three often communicates **anticipation**, or the expectation that something is about to happen. And before we get to the biblical examples, it is interesting that (again) in our own culture (just as three can represent complete or full) three also often represent anticipation. I mentioned in the introduction – We start races with “On your mark, get set –

go!" They go on the third count. Also, if I am going to take a picture, I sometimes count 1,2,3! And if I want to be funny I take the picture on two. But you anticipate three! The parent says to the child: "I am going to count to three and I expect that toy to be back in the toy box - 1 - 2—3!" Action is expected. *In our culture the number three is a number of anticipation*, and perhaps this has its roots in our Judeo-Christian heritage, because in the Bible 1-2-3 was a huge deal. It was often on the third occurrence or the third day that God chooses to work or reveal Himself. Let's work through some examples.

Elijah in his battle with the priests of Baal, doused the offering three times - Completely soaked. And after the soaking God blazes down fire on the offering. 1,2,3 and God words. Elijah on another occasion stretched himself over a dead girl three times. 1-2-3 and then God raised her from the dead. When a count of three was involved, the people of God had a raised awareness and expectation both that it was an important occasion and that God may very well intercede.

In the book of Esther, when King Ahasuerus decreed that all Jews would be killed, a three day fast was proclaimed for all the Jews. And there was great anticipation for the third day of the fast: **Now it came about on the third day that Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace... (Esther 5:1).** On the third day, God worked and they were promised safety by the King.

God tells Abraham to take his only son Isaac and bring him up the mountain to sacrifice Him. Do you remember the timing on that story? **Gen. 22:4 On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance.** Abraham knew God would

require the sacrifice. Day one was travel; day two was travel – on the third day, God says kill your son – and on THAT 3rd day the sacrifice is provided.

Moses and the people of Israel came to Mt. Sinai. It was there God was going to meet the people. But when Lord? On the third day. [Ex. 19:10b](#) Let them wash their garments; [Ex. 19:11](#) and let them be ready for the **third day**, for on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. [Ex. 19:16](#) So it came about on the **third day**, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who *were* in the camp trembled. Not the first day, not the second day – but it was on the third day that God came in power and the earth shook.

The prophet Hosea told the people: [Hos. 6:1](#) “Come, let us return to the LORD. For He has torn *us*, but He will heal us; He has wounded *us*, but He will bandage us. [Hos. 6:2](#) “He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the **third day**, That we may live before Him.

Ok – who sees what is going on here? Do you know where we are heading? No, let me say it a more correct way. Do you know where God is heading with all this emphasis on the third this and three that? Listen with new ears to a very familiar story:

Jesus said: [Matt. 12:40](#) for just as JONAH WAS **THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER**, so will the Son of Man be **three days** and three nights in the heart of the earth.

A little later: [Matt. 16:21](#) Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the **third day**.

And another time he said: [Matt. 17:23](#) and they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the **third day**.” And they were deeply grieved. [Matt. 20:19](#) and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify *Him*, and on the **third day** He will be raised up.”

And using the temple as a backdrop, [John 2:19](#) Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in **three days** I will raise it up.”

And he talked so much about three days this and that - that at his death the people mocked him: [Mark 15:29](#) Those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, and saying, “Ha! You who *are going to* destroy the temple and rebuild it in **three days**.

And he talked so much about the third day that the chiefs priests came to Pilate and asked: [Matt. 27:64](#) “Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the **third day**, otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him away and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ ...

But He did rise – and I tell you beloved, Jesus did not rise on the third day because two days were not long enough for Him to accomplish his “to do list” in the netherworld. Jesus did not rise on the third day because he liked Sunday better than Monday. He rose on the third day – **because the third day is the day of God’s power!** Of God’s provision and God’s promise – rooted and set-up through the Old Testament narrative.

And everyone should have known it was coming! They should have remembered Esther and God’s promised deliverance. They should have remembered Abraham, and God’s provision. They should have remembered Moses and God’s power!

Application

Over and over Jesus said, "I am going to be back on the third day." But who was ready for his return? *Nobody* – no one was ready. And I believe, right there – we find our application. Our goal is not to make the same mistake.

Before Jesus rose into heaven he said, "Don't worry – I'll be back:" [Matt. 24:44](#) **Be ready all the time. For the Son of Man will come when least expected.** Anticipate it. Be sober minded. Be alert! We may be close to God's next "third day" when Jesus returns. Our challenge is to be ready. And not just for his return, but for the work He wants to do within us today. I would phrase our application it this way: "Live in anticipation before God." – or – Don't be spiritually asleep!"

Don't be like German commander Colonel Johann Rall who during the Revolutionary War received a message. The Germans were allies of England during that war – and there were close to 30,000 German troops in this country. The message was that General George Washington and his Continental army had secretly crossed the Delaware River that morning and were advancing on Trenton, New Jersey where they were camped! However, the messenger was denied an audience with the commander and instead wrote his message on a piece of paper. A porter took the note to the colonel, but because Rall was involved in a poker game he stuffed the unread note into his pocket. When the guards at the camp began firing their muskets in a futile attempt to stop Washington's army, Rall was still playing cards. Without time to organize, the German army was captured. Rall was killed in the battle and the note was found in his vest pocket.

He is the poster-boy for being unprepared. He gave Washington his first major victory of the war. He was caught up with leisure, comfort and pride and neglected to be

ready for what was coming down the road at him. He should have been seriously minding his responsibility as an officer.

We stay prepared by taking seriously our responsibilities as believers; not neglecting our assembling together. Not neglecting our time in the word and prayer, and diligently seeking basic obedience with Christ as husbands, wives, students, employees and employers.

I would like to close with this poem, written in 1936 by Herbert Lockyer:

There's a man in yonder glory I have loved for many years,
He has cleared my guilty conscience and has banished all my fears.
He is coming in a moment in the twinkling of an eye,
And no time will be allotted for you to utter one good-bye.
No time to kiss the husband or embrace the loving wife,
If they are but united in the bonds of holy life.
Are you ready, Christian, ready, for shout and trump and voice?
Will His coming make you tremble or cause you to rejoice?
Are you walking, talking with Him daily, taking Him your care,
Do you live so close to heaven that a breath would take you there?