

**September 21, 2014 - 11:00 a.m. Pastor
Jonathan Falwell**

What If? What If His Story Became Your Story?

Scripture: Acts 2:21-24

Summary: Expounding on Acts 2:21-24, Pastor Jonathan Falwell encourages us to ask the question: What if God's story became our story?

What if God's story became our story? What if the story of Jesus dying on the cross, of His willingly laying down His life to pay for our sins, the fact that He died and was buried and rose again, what if that became what drove us every day of our lives? What would happen if the Church of Jesus Christ, not just this one, but all the churches, took it upon ourselves to understand that God has placed us here for a reason, that God has sent us to make an impact, to make a difference, to reach our neighbors, to reach our friends, to reach our coworkers, to reach our family?

What if God's Church became that church? What if God's Church became the Church that recognized the call that God has placed on us and we just simply did exactly what God has called us to do? What would happen? What kind of impact would that have? What would that look like in our community? In the Lynchburg community we have about 250,000 people that call this place home. In the Roanoke area, about another 250,000. Danville a little bit smaller.

But God has placed us in these communities for a reason and for a purpose: to reach out into this community and to let people know who Jesus is and that He is alive. And what would happen, what if our church decided it's our job, it's our duty, it's our calling, it's our responsibility, and it is our privilege to go out there and let them know? In the Lynchburg area alone, over 110,000 people don't know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and God has sent us, and God has called us, and God has equipped us.

You remember that verse we looked at not long ago from Acts 1:8, where it says, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem and Judea and in all Samaria and to the ends of the earth." Throughout the places we call home, throughout the streets on which we live, in every street corner, in every neighborhood, in every workplace, we are to be His witnesses.

Now we talked about that word *power* a lot this past summer, and I hope you've got that. I hope you understand what that means. And if you weren't here and you weren't part of our services, I encourage you to go to our website and start watching video, because we talked a lot about power that God was going to give to us when we come to Christ.

And then He says, "You shall be witnesses to me." When we think of the word *witness*, what do we think about? We think of the idea of going out and knocking on doors. That's important. We think of the idea of going out and saying, "Hey, let me tell you about Jesus." We've got a lot of people in our church who do that. I look down here, and the Henleys are here and they are passionate about that and they go and knock on doors and it's great. God uses that.

I think of people like Jennifer Harder sitting over here and Cyrus and Julie Madmando, just this past Wednesday night, as I was walking around our property, I had the opportunity to walk into the cafeteria and here is a group of probably 30, 40, 50 people gathered there, eating and worshiping and studying the Word of God together. Why? Because they decided to go out in their vehicles, pick people up and bring them to church. That is witnesses.

But that's not what this word really is. You see, this word *witness* in the original Greek is the word *martus*, which is the idea of being a witness of something. In other words, not going out and telling, but that we have seen it. In fact, it's also the same word that's used of a guy in the Scripture named Stephen. Remember the story of Stephen? Same word. It's the idea that Stephen was a witness; Stephen was a martyr; and so it gives us the idea that because of the power that God gives to us, we are called to be willing to give everything if needed to let people know about Jesus.

And so Jesus said, "You will be witnesses." Change it: You will be martyrs, if need be, because the message is that important. The message is that valuable. What if this church was filled to overflowing with people who got that, who understood that, who were willing to do it? What would happen in our community? Man, it would change everything. It would change everything.

We would see—no question about it—we would see revival break out in Lynchburg and Roanoke and Danville, and it would go around the world, and it would start from right here. Why? Because we would want to be that church that just simply did what God called us to do. What if His story became our story? God's given us everything we need, and we cannot fail. That's the cool thing about it: we cannot fail.

My dad used to preach a message many years ago, preached it a lot. In fact, if you've been around here a lot, you've probably heard him talk about that when he went to college at BBC he arrived there and one of his professors on the first day of class would write these four questions up on the wall of the classroom. And one of the classrooms was this: What would you attempt to do if you knew that you could not fail? What would you try to do if you knew you could not fail? Think about it.

Think about this for a moment: What if, if you knew you could not fail, would you share the gospel with your neighbor? If you knew you couldn't blow it; if you knew you couldn't mess it up; if you knew you wouldn't stumble all over your words; if you knew that you could not fail,

would you do it? God's telling you, "I've given you everything you need. I've called you. I've equipped you. I've placed you there for a reason. I put you in that spot to be used."

What if God's story became our story? What if the message of the gospel became what we were passionate about, excited about, and couldn't help but tell the world about?

Now there's no question about it; when we talk about God's story, we have to get a glimpse of and understand what God's story really is. In fact, in Acts 2, the very next chapter after we find Acts 1:8 where we find where Jesus tells them what they're going to do, we find they went together and gathered together in that upper room, 120 of them, prayed together, worshiped together, but then in the next chapter what happened is what began in that room, what began with them doing exactly what Jesus told them to do, it changed everything because they understood the story that God gave them.

Look what it says in Acts 2:21 and following. "And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord Shall be saved. Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it."

You know what that tells us? The fact that Jesus rose again, that there is nothing that could stop the story, the good news, the message of the gospel. Then why don't we share it? Nothing can put that message down, and yet we walk every day through lives wondering what other people are going to think. Are they going to laugh at me when I tell them about Jesus? Are they going to mock me when I tell them that I'm a Christian, that I go to church? What are they going to think? What are they going to say? Are they going to accept me? Are they going to reject me?

And we walk through every day of our lives wondering those very things, and that is what keeps us from doing what Christ has called us to do. But this passage tells us the story of God is that the world took Him and crucified Him and put Him down and celebrated because they thought they had defeated Him; they thought they had won. They put Him into a tomb and sealed the tomb and said, "Yes, it's over. We've won. We're victorious."

And then the stone rolled away and Jesus rose again, and now we stand in victory; there is nothing the world can do to stop us. What if we got passionate about telling that story? What if we became that church?

That story is the story of salvation. The story that Jesus gave to us is a powerful story. The whole idea of salvation, in fact if you look in the Scriptures in 1 Timothy 2, we understand and we see what it really means, this idea of God's story of salvation. It says in 1 Timothy 2:3 and 4, "For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

God wants us to come to Christ. God wants your neighbor to come to Christ. God wants your coworker to come to Christ. God wants your classmate to come to Christ. God wants your mom and your dad to come to Christ and your brother and your sister and your son and your daughter. God wants them to get saved. In other words, the God of the universe is on our side. He wants this to happen. Why do we keep so to ourselves about what Christ has done? We have to go and we have to tell.

It's a story of salvation, but it's also a story of redemption. I love this. It's a story of redemption. Look what it says in the next verse in 1 Timothy 2:5, "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all."

The idea of redemption is that God took that which was dead and He made it alive. God took what was dead in sin, God took that which was completely useless to God and had no value and no future and no hope, literally dead, and because of the cross and because of the empty tomb that He brought life back into it. That's what Christ did for us.

In light of what we talked about a moment ago, the idea of salvation, God wants that message to transform everyone. And let me make sure you understand this: When you walk through your daily life, when you drive home in a little while and you go through your neighborhood, you are driving by houses that are full of dead men and dead women.

Colossians 2:13 talks about how we were dead in our sin. Dead. No hope. No future. This life full of pain and sorrow and bad news. This is all that there is. We are dead. And as you drive down the streets, as you walk into the restaurants, as you go back to work, recognize that everyone that you come in contact with that doesn't know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are like dead men.

This morning I saw on the news a story on CNN's website. They had a picture there of somewhere—I'm not even sure where it took place—but there was a car of teenagers that was driving around, apparently maybe going too fast, as teenagers sometimes do, and they ran off the side of the road and tumbled down a hill and into a river. The car was upside-down in the river, and the picture that I saw this morning on CNN's website was that car in the river upside down, surrounded by thirty or more people that had stopped their cars on the street and had run down that hill and gotten into that place and were trying to pull open doors, trying to break glass, doing everything they possibly could to pull those kids out of that car, because they knew if they didn't those kids would die.

Those people were willing to risk their own lives by walking into that river, doing whatever it took. And they were there, surrounding the car, pulling on every door, knocking on every window, to try to save those kids. What an incredible image of selflessness; what an incredible image of hope that we see in our culture today that people would be willing to do that for people they don't even know.

And yet here we are as Christians, as followers of Christ, and everybody that we come in contact with that does not know Christ, according to the Word of God, they are dead, and within us we have the gift of life that can rejuvenate and refresh them and bring them back to not only life, but

to new life and an incredible life and eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. What if we were the church that told that story of salvation, of redemption, of forgiveness.

The idea of forgiveness. Look what it says in Romans 4:23, “Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification.”

In other words, our sin keeps us from God, but because Christ rose again, because He lives today, because He is alive, we have been given the gift of forgiveness. Why can't we tell that? So often, we as Christians in the church today get caught up in theological debates. We get up in conflicts. We try to debate issues and talk about things like election and Calvinism and predestination and foreknowledge and whether people were chosen to be saved and how does that look?

All I know is this, like what my dad said, and I love the way he said it; that whole issue of election and Calvinism, he said, “I don't really know. I'll ask God when I get to heaven. all I know is this: the more people I share the gospel with, the more people get elected, so let's get out there and preach the gospel in every setting we possibly can.” And when we get to heaven we'll figure it out.

So Christian, put down the Starbucks coffee, get out of the coffee shop talking about it, debating it, reading the books about it, and let's go out there and let's let God worry about who's elect. Let's just share the gospel. Preach it and let people know who Jesus is.

It's salvation, it's redemption, it's forgiveness, but it's impossible to allow God's story to be our story unless we truly have let that story be part of our experience, unless we've let it change us. Look what it says in the rest of this passage, 1 Timothy 2. We already read verse 5, where it says, “There is one God and one Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all.”

But then he goes on to say, “To be testified in due time, for which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle. I am speaking the truth in Christ and not lying. A teacher of the gentiles in faith and truth.”

Verse 7, “For which I was appointed a preacher.” Everyone in this room has been appointed a preacher. God has called you to preach. Now He doesn't necessarily mean preaching on a stage like this one. It doesn't mean that you're going to go out and plant a church. It doesn't mean that you're going to go out and have crusades like Billy Graham. It doesn't mean that you're going to go out and do those kinds of things.

What it does mean is that you are going to do something that is far more important; you're going to be a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the way that you live each and every day of your life in front of everybody that you have the opportunity to be in contact with. God has called you to be a preacher.

A few years ago I preached a message here talking about some things here at the church. And as you know, our services go out by television, and later that week I got a letter from someone, a hand-written note. I opened it up and began reading the letter from a guy who was telling me some pretty incredible things.

He was telling me that he was incarcerated, in prison at the Green Rock Correctional Institution near Danville. I've told you about this place before. Right now, in fact, there are people gathered in Green Rock worshiping with us. They're going to church with us. That's our Danville campus. It's a very secure campus.

I got a letter from this guy who said, You don't know me, but I was watching your service as we always do, and you were preaching and talking about being a preacher, that there is somebody out there right now that God is calling to be a preacher and you've been fighting and saying, "I don't have what it takes and where I am there is no way I could do that in the situation I'm in. There is no way I can be a preacher."

And you know what that guy said? He said, "When I heard those words, I knew right there and right then, God had called me to be a preacher."

And he's in prison. And you know what that guy did? That guy started preaching. He started sharing his faith. He was involved in the church services down there. He started leading in the church services down there. God is doing some incredible things down there.

A couple of years ago, about a year and a half ago, I had the opportunity to go down to Green Rock and preach on Saturday night and Sunday night. I walked in there, and for the first time I got to meet that guy. I got to meet him and talk to him. He's up there leading—I told you about this—he's leading the service and preaching like a fire. It was awesome. The room was full twice—Saturday and Sunday, two different groups of people—and they are all worshiping God, singing to God. They've got a choir over here full of guys singing their hearts out. It was so cool.

It was incredible to think that a guy sitting in jail, a guy who'd been there for about six years—honestly, not a lot of hope for the future—sitting there thinking, in the human sense, "There's not much I could do. I'm in prison. What can I do? God can't use me. I'm in prison."

You know what? He just said, "God called me and I'm going to do it." Do you think he was worried about what people thought? Nah, I don't think so. You think he was worried about whether people would laugh at him? Nope, because he got up there and did it anyway. Think he was worried about what the other inmates might say or what they might do? No. He just got up and proudly and boldly proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ—Romans 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ"—and did it and did it and is still doing it. Isn't that cool?

This morning I was preaching the early service and I got done preaching and as I was walking off stage to the back room to get ready for the next service I saw a guy walking down the aisle and said, "I know him! Where do I know him from?" He waved at me and I waved back and walked over to talk to him and it hit me. You know who that guy was? It's really cool. This guy

right here. Jamie, stand up. This is Jamie Toler, and he was that guy from Green Rock Correctional Institution that God called to preach. And yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

He called me over here. You know what he said? Sit down. We're not done. You are all thinking you can go to lunch now. No. Sit down. Sit down. He called me over here and said pretty much the same thing he said to me in that letter years ago. He said, "I'm ready to go to work. I'm going to go preach. I'm ready. I am called to preach. I'll whatever. I'm ready to serve God right now right here."

He also told me that he's not supposed to be out right now, but don't worry; he didn't break out. A couple of weeks ago, he told the guys down at Green Rock, "I think it would be really cool if God did something. I'd love to be there for the first sermon in that *What If?* series. What if God could do that? I'd love to be there."

You know what's amazing? On Thursday of this week, unbeknownst to him, he got a phone call from the lawyer, the warden, they said the judge has thrown it all out. Get out of here. You're leaving today. Today. And today, when he told me in that letter, the minute I get out, I'm showing up at Thomas Road. We're going to change the world and I'll do whatever God's calling. I'm ready to do it."

And you know what he did when he got out of jail? You know what a lot of people do when they get out of jail? They go celebrate and party. They go to McDonalds—that's what I would do. They would do all this stuff. You know what he did? He came to the place that God called him to preach. What if God can use this guy to change the world? What if?

In Acts 2:36, the passage just following what Jesus did when He told them to go and be witnesses to Him, just after they met as a group of 120 in the upper room, just after they walked out of their place and the Holy Spirit descended upon them and they went out there to be passionate and to change the world and the church was birthed, in Acts 2 Peter was preaching and said,

"So let everyone in Israel know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, to be both Lord and Messiah!" Peter's words pierced their hearts, and they said to him and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter replied, "Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is to you, to your children, and [and even to the gentiles]."

You know what that means to us? It means to you and to your children and to your neighbors and to your coworkers and to your classmates and to your family members and the people who live down the street and the people you're going to meet at the restaurant in just a few minutes. This message has been given to you and to your family and to all of them; a message that changes everything.

"All who have been called by the Lord our God." Then Peter continued preaching for a long time, strongly urging all his listeners, "Save yourselves from all that have gone astray!"

And verse 41, listen very carefully, pay attention because we're going to close with this, but I don't want you to miss this. If somebody is asleep next to you, hit 'em. I don't want you to miss this. I don't want you to miss this. Verse 41, "Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church, about 3,000 in all."

What happened and what started from a group of 120 who sat in a room praying together and said, "What if we just did what God told us to do? What would happen?" And here in just a few days thousands of people coming to Christ. What if we did the same thing? What if we did the same thing?

You know there's two ways to ask the question *What if?* You can ask the question *What if?* in the perspective of looking back. *What if we had done what God called us to do? What if we had obeyed Him? What if we had told our story? What if we had shared the gospel? What would have happened?* That would have been a question and story we would have asked out of regret and sorrow for what could have been.

Oh, but there is another way to ask *What if?* And this question of *What if?* is asking what if in the future, in the sense of *What if we will do right now what God has called us to do? What if we will show up and do exactly what Jesus has shared with us that needs to be our passion? What if we would go out and tell our story? What if we would not worry about what people thought of us? What if we would not worry about whether they would mock us for our faith? What if we were not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes? What if we would tell that story to the world? What would happen then?*

And that is a question that will be asked out of joy in our hearts, because we would be looking forward to what only God could do. And I'm going to tell you something. As your pastor, as long as I'm the pastor of this church, I'm not going to allow us to ask that question in the future out of regret. We're going to ask that question today, and then we're going to act and serve.

What if God's story became our story? What if we were that church? What if we took God at His word and let people know what Jesus has done for us? One hundred twenty and a couple of days, 3,000. In this room over 4,000 people. the first service, over 4,000 people. In Danville, 600; in Roanoke 200-300; Spanish campus, 150-200; Korean campus, 300-400. All of our campuses, Hope Aglow, All Nations downtown, all the different groups that are meeting; all the different places right now. All of our children's ministries, all of our student ministries, everybody gathered together, about 10,000-12,000 people.

What if we did what those 120 did? I'm not going to do the math because I hate math, but the answer would be exponential. We would turn this community upside down with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We would turn Roanoke and Danville upside down with the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's our duty, and I know we've all got a lot of duties and jobs, a lot of things on us we've got to do. This week I've preached funeral after funeral after funeral; I've got another one next week.

Today I'm preaching here and I'm going to leave in a few minutes and I'm going to drive down to Roanoke and preach at Roanoke at 3 o'clock at our friendship campus that we just started. Then at 5 o'clock I'm preaching at another church down there that's dedicating a building. I had

to prepare all those sermons—even though I've got to be honest with you; some of the sermons merged together because I got tired of putting new ones together, so there is going to be a little overlap there.

We've got a lot of stuff going on; a lot of stuff to do; and I know you're just as busy if not busier. I get that. But let me tell you something: There is nothing that we will do that is more important than letting people see God's story alive within us. What if we were that church?

Heavenly Father, we thank you. We thank you that you've chosen us; you've equipped us; that you've given to us everything we need to do what you've called us to do. So God, help us to do it. It's a simple statement: help us to do it. God, I just pray right now for the people that are gathered in this room, that what you would do for us in our lives right now, in this moment, is raise up an army that would be like that 120 in that upper room in Jerusalem, that we would just simply say we're ready, we know we're called, we know we are equipped, and we are not ashamed. We are courageous and we will go and we will share and we will tell, and I promise you that if we will do that, our God will pour out blessings of heaven on this community. God, do that today.

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