

## Where Are We Going?

### Let's Listen Series

2 Chronicles 7:12-22

Dr. Michael Helms

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Once Albert Einstein was going on a train to an out-of-town engagement. The conductor stopped by to punch his ticket. The great scientist, preoccupied with his work, with great embarrassment rummaged through his coat pockets and briefcase to no avail. He could not find his ticket.

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The conductor said, “We all know who you are, Dr. Einstein. I’m sure you bought a ticket. Don’t worry about it. Everything is okay.” (Ibid)

The conductor walked on down the aisle punching other tickets. Before he moved to the next car, he looked back and saw Dr. Einstein down on his hands and knees looking under his seat trying to find his ticket. He came back and gently said, “Dr. Einstein, please don’t worry about it. I know who you are.” (Ibid)

Einstein looked up and said, “I too know who I am. What I don’t know is where I’m going!” (Ibid)

This is the problem with many organizations, including churches. We don’t know where we are going.

Think of it like this. If our church were a business and we were marketing a product, we would be looking to better our market share, improve customer service, decrease the cost of production, improve the quality of our product, and seek to understand the changing demands of the consumer. We would not assume that everything that made our product successful today would continue to make it successful next year.

Or, think of it like this. Last time you went on a vacation, before you ever packed your bags, you knew where you were going, didn’t you?

Someone had made plans, and you had come to an agreement on where you were going. You saved your money. You were excited.

Knowing where you were going made a difference in the clothes you packed for the trip. You would not carry beach clothes to the mountains or ski boots to the ocean.

Knowing your destination is essential, whether you run a business or whether you are going on a vacation.

Knowing the destination is just as important for a church. If we don't know where we are going, we will just wander around without getting to the place God wants us to go.

What if churches never developed a plan? What if churches never looked to God for what God wants for their future? What if we never risked anything? What if we never walked into the future on faith? What if we were just satisfied?

The Message Bible says it like this: "If people cannot see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves" (Proverbs 29:18).

The game of chess has been used in schools, prisons, and in other settings to teach people to how to think critically. Every move has implications for the next one and chess players learn that you must think about the move you are making in relation to the moves your hope to make in the future and the moves you think your opponent might make. Those who learn to think of the possibilities several moves ahead become the better chess players.

Playing chess against the computer is like playing against God. It knows all the future moves and every move it makes counters your move perfectly. One thing playing chess against the computer does is show you the consequences of a bad move.

For me, it shows me how easily I become focused on one line of thought while ignoring other areas that need my attention on the board.

Because I often do not see far enough ahead, I will stumble all over myself with the moves I make.

God wants us to see what He is doing. God is already in the future. God is inviting us to come and join Him in the moves he is making that will ultimately cause every knee to bow and every tongue to confess that He is Lord.

The truth is, we do need help to see what God has in store for us. God wants us to see what we can become and to see the potential we have. God wants to reveal this to us.

After King Solomon had completed the magnificent temple in Jerusalem, Israel stumbled all over themselves because they could not see God's plan for their future.

They became more concerned with fulfilling their own selfish desires than with keeping their eyes focused on the purpose God had for them.

The result was that they lost sight of God's future for them.

God, who is a God of the present but also a God of the future, came to Solomon and gave him a clear picture of the future. He was very clear that if they stayed on their current path, the beautiful temple that had been constructed would cease to exist. Israel would be uprooted from the land, and the people would be ridiculed among other nations.

So to keep this from becoming their future, God appealed to Solomon and told him this would not happen if the people would humble themselves, pray, and seek his face and turn from their wicked ways. God said he would hear them and that he would heal their land. (verse 14)

This coming January will mark my 30th year of fulltime Christian ministry. During those thirty years, I have attended many church growth conferences and heard many inspirational speakers tell their stories of how they took a small group and turned it into a congregation of several thousand.

Most of the time I am sitting there with hundreds of pastors just like me, people who are pastoring churches that are 50, 100, or 150 years old. Many of those churches are like ours. The average Sunday attendance is 200 or less.

So most of those pastors are like me. They are thinking, “Why don’t these conferences send us a steady stream of pastors that are pastoring churches like ours that can tell us how to move their churches from 200 in attendance to 400? Bring me someone that’s pastoring a 100-year-old church that’s moved their baptisms from 5 to 25 and they’ve done this in more than one church and five years later all of these people are still active in the church. Bring me someone who helped their old congregation see a future much different from their past.

Can I be blunt with you? Can I be very honest with you this morning? One of the reasons why churches like Athens Church and the Twelve Stones have grown so rapidly is that they have pulled members from churches with smaller memberships in the surrounding areas. However, that would not have happened to the extent it has happened if the smaller churches knew where they were going.

Truthfully, the larger churches do a better job with vision. Sure, they have a lot more bells and whistles. They can entice children and teenagers with a lot of technology and a fun-filled atmosphere. They have some superstar pastors, but I don’t believe they can do relationships better in Athens or in Lawrenceville than we can in Jefferson.

I don’t think their laity are any smarter or more committed than you.

However, the landscape has changed and if the light of FBC Jefferson is going to burn bright and make any difference in this community in the next decade and beyond, we must know where we are going and we must make a commitment to go there together.

We need to do what God asked Solomon and Israel to do long ago.

First, God asked Solomon to humble himself.

Any time you ask for God’s help, guidance, leadership, and direction, this is an act of humility. Moving into the future and thinking we have all the answers is an act of arrogance. If we get up in the morning without a belief that God is in our day, leading and guiding us, that’s arrogance.

We need to invite God into our day. We need to invite God into our lives and we need to into our future as a church.

I want to invite you into a process of writing our future story which will serve as a guide for our decision making for years to come.

To lay a foundation for that, let's set aside some time to listen to each other and to God.

All of you are invited to gather with two other people for ten times over a 100-day period to listen to each other's dreams and ideas about our church, to listen to God, to discuss how God is working in your life, to read scripture, to pray, and to reflect.

We all need others to help strengthen our journey of faith.

We need God's love and guidance to have a healthy church.

In small groups like these, we can find value in relationships and know that we are not self-sufficient.

This will be a new experience for some of you. If you will step out of your comfort zone. I encourage you to be open to this. If you will God will provide insight to you about our church.

At the end of the 100 days your recorded insights will become valuable information that will become part of our bank of ideas as we begin to work on our future story early next year.

Just as God promised Solomon that his eyes and ears would always be open to the prayers that the people offered in that temple, we can count on the promise that God will be available to us.

Secondly, God asked Solomon and the people to seek his face. What does that mean?

Maybe we can use a little technology this morning as an illustration.

How many of you like to Face-Time or use Skype to talk to a friend or a family member?

Seeing someone face-to-face is more personal than just hearing his or her voice.

When our son John was stationed in Afghanistan, we wanted to see his face. Our Skype conversations were very important because they were much more personal than just hearing his voice.

Seeing him face-to-face brought us great comfort.

Now when we pray, of course we are not going to see the face of God. Seeing him face-to-face means that through prayer we can draw closer to God and have a more personal, intimate relationship with God.

The very act of doing this is acknowledging that we are looking for this kind of relationship with God.

Finally, God asked the people to repent, to turn away from their sins. God promised to heal their land.

Again, this takes humility. We know that Israel did not do this over the long course of their history. They decided to go in a direction that was away from God.

“There is always a direction that seems right,” says a verse in Proverbs, “but it will end in death.” (Proverbs 14:12)

Churches are dying and closing at an alarming rate. We have a window of time to not only insure that this doesn't happen to this church, but to make decisions that can propel us to have a significant impact on this community.

However, we should repent of complacency, of being afraid to follow God on faith, of not giving sacrificially, of not having a burden to see people come to know Jesus, of thinking we have completed our time of service, of trying to keep things the way they are, of not being willing to listen to God and follow God into the future.

Albert Einstein was on a train. It was moving. He was sure he bought a ticket, but he had no idea where he was going.

I don't want to pastor a church like that. I hope you don't want to be a part of a church like that. I want each of you to know where we are going and to be able to say definitively to others who we are, where we are going, and how we are going to get there.

That will help many people decide whether they want to get on board with us as we seek to do what God has asked us to do.

Today you have a ticket. We want to involve as many people in our church as possible on prayer teams.

We'd like to punch your ticket for this journey we are about to take. It begins today with this 100 days of prayer.

If you want to form your own team of three people, just check that box on your ticket. You may ask any two people you'd like to join you in prayer. After the service, you may come and pick up your prayer manuals for yourself and the two people you will ask. You can meet anywhere and anytime the three of you choose. Make sure you write your name on the back of the ticket.

If you want to be on a team but you don't want to ask others to join you, just check, “I want to be on a team.” If you will pray with two other people ten times over 100 days, there is a place for you to check on this ticket. Right now, check that box and sign your name on the back of the ticket. The person that calls you will be responsible for getting your prayer manual to you.

If you do not want to participate in a group because you have some personal reason, but you want to pray during this 100 days of prayer in a disciplined manner, setting aside 10 times to read, listen to God, record an insight in our prayer journal, then there is a place for you to check and to sign as well. Check that box, write your name on the ticket and get your prayer manual after the service.

We have a conductor coming down the aisle to pick up your ticket.

Our goal is to listen to each other, which is hard to do if you are not in a group, and listen to God, so we can discern what we believe God wants our future story to be.

Because the Holy Spirit lives within us, what emerges will be rich, powerful, exciting, fresh, motivating, and unpredictable.

This is an exciting time. Exciting days are ahead of us.

Collectively, these next ten weeks will help set the direction for many, many years to come.

I'm asking you to think of it in that way. I'm asking you to dream. I am asking you to humble yourselves, to listen to each other, and to God, and to repent.

God is going to reveal to us where He wants us to go, who He wants us to be, and our church will have a significant place here for the sake of God's Kingdom.