

Salient Points

1. Shrinking Attention Spans

"In 2004, the average attention span of those studied was two and a half minutes. By 2012, that had been cut in half... At the time the book was published, the average attention span was 47 seconds in 2023." "Oxford University Press chose brain rot as its 2024 word of the year... the 2025 word of the year that they chose is somehow worse: rage bait."

2. Christmas vs. Epiphany: Microscope vs. Telescope

"If Christmas zooms in and focuses our attention on a manger in Bethlehem, Epiphany zooms out, showing us that what happened in Bethlehem affects the destiny of every person who has ever lived." "Christmas is the microscope. It shows us the detail of Christ's incarnation... Epiphany, then, is the telescope. It shows us the vastness of God's plan to gather up all things in this one."

3. Different Seekers of Jesus with Different Motives

"Those searching for Jesus, consider all of them, the Magi, the soldiers dispatched by King Herod, Jesus' own family. They all have different, even competing, sets of motives." "Jesus, hidden in plain sight, offers us the same invitation today: 'Seek me.' There's not even a requirement that your motives are pure first."

4. Bruegel's Paintings as Visual Aid for Attention

"Bruegel is known for concealing the main subjects of his paintings. He often hides them among cloaked villagers who bend under their burdens or brace against the cold." "It's not always that I don't know what I'm looking for, it's that life has become so crowded with brain rot and rage bait... I'm so distracted that I've forgotten how to look."

5. Zooming Out to Zoom In Faithfully

"How can we zoom out regularly so that we can zoom in faithfully? How can we respond in love to the needs of others?" "Zooming out at Epiphany not only helps us to keep the end in view when all things are gathered up in Christ, it also helps us to see the brokenness and pain of the world."

6. Call to Prayer and Fasting

"In the lobby today, there are several copies of the prayer liturgy that we have prayed together each week on Wednesday for the last decade plus." "In addition to praying, perhaps you'd commit to fast a meal or even an entire day during the week, during the month of January."

Summary (200 words)

Austin delivers a sermon at Solid Rock Church on the 11th day of Christmas, transitioning into the Epiphany season. He opens by citing research showing attention spans have shrunk from 2.5 minutes (2004) to 47 seconds (2023), connecting this to cultural phenomena like "brain rot" and "rage bait."

The central metaphor contrasts Christmas as a "microscope" (focusing on Christ's birth in Bethlehem) with Epiphany as a "telescope" (revealing God's salvation extending to all nations). Austin examines gospel texts showing various people searching for Jesus—the Magi seeking worship, Herod seeking destruction, and Mary and Joseph seeking their lost son—noting that Jesus invites all to seek Him regardless of initial motives.

Using Pieter Bruegel's 16th-century paintings, where Christ is hidden among busy village scenes, Austin illustrates how our distracted lives cause us to miss God's presence. The paintings train viewers to look carefully, just as spiritual disciplines train attention.

Austin concludes by encouraging the congregation to adopt prayer and fasting during Epiphany, using these practices to "zoom out" and gain eternal perspective while remaining engaged with the world's brokenness. He emphasizes that Christ is "so close" to those He came to save.

Austin's message:

00:00:09,660 --> 00:00:22,900 [Speaker 0]

... Good morning. Welcome to Solid Rock. It's great to see everybody here this morning, and Happy New Year. Uh, my name is Austin. If I haven't had a chance to meet you, I'd love to meet you before you get away today.

00:00:22,960 --> 00:01:13,120 [Speaker 0]

That was a good scripture reading to stand for. I love that passage from Ephesians 1. In her 2023 book entitled *Attention Span*, psychologist Gloria Mark discusses an ongoing study that began in 2004, studying people's attention spans. And it probably won't surprise many of us, uh, to know the results of that study is that our attention spans are shrinking. Increasing, yeah. [chuckles] They are shrinking. They are shrinking. In, in 2004, the average attention span of those studied was two and a half minutes. Uh, by 2012, that had been cut in half. The attention spans of those studied was 75 seconds. At the time the book was published, the average attention span was 47 seconds in 2023,

00:01:13,120 --> 00:01:19,480 [Speaker 0]

meaning that I have already lost most of you. [laughing]

00:01:19,480 --> 00:01:45,780 [Speaker 0]

Uh, we live in an age when our attention is damaged, our attention is commodified. Oxford University Press chose brain rot as its 2024 word of the year. You familiar with that term? [sighs] Oh, boy. If that weren't bad enough, the 2025 word of the year that they chose is somehow worse: rage bait. You heard that word?

00:01:45,780 --> 00:03:28,200 [Speaker 0]

Over the past week, several of you have probably taken time to reflect on 2025. Maybe you've done this on your own or with family members as you've gathered together. Maybe it's an annual tradition for you to look back on the previous year and to celebrate all that God has done, and to look back, maybe with some sadness, on some things that have not gone as planned. It's typical during this time of year in the wider culture to set aside a few moments, to zoom out, to look both backward in reflection and forward in anticipation. I wonder, however, if our shrinking attention spans make even this practice more difficult to engage. Everything around us beckons us to move on without reflecting on the past, and it reduces our thinking about the future to resolutions that are, if we're honest, regularly pretty self-focused, and with which we rarely follow through. H- Happy New Year. [chuckles] [laughing] The church calendar combats this tendency to move unthinkingly from one moment to the next. So welcome to church, where we are still celebrating the Christmas season from which the wider culture has moved on. This is, in fact, the 11th day of our 12-day celebration. This is the second week of Christmas, and when that tw- 12-day celebration of Christmas ends, the next day is another feast day. Isn't it fun to be a Christian? [laughing] That feast day is known as Epiphany, and Epiphany kicks off the season on the church calendar known by the same name.

00:03:28,200 --> 00:03:43,180 [Speaker 0]

So at Christmas, we celebrate God's nearness. Israel's Messiah has come. During Epiphany, we celebrate just how far-reaching that nearness is.

00:03:43,180 --> 00:04:13,720 [Speaker 0]

As such, the church calendar also combats our tendency to think about the future through the narrow lens of self. So God's salvation extends to the farthest reaches of our world. He's drawn near, not just to his people, Israel, and not just to us, but to every tribe, tongue, and nation. The forces that conspire to separate our fallen humanity from God are, in the end, no match for what God has done in Christ.

00:04:15,200 --> 00:04:18,209 [Speaker 0]

Pausing for an amen.

00:04:18,209 --> 00:04:18,219 [Speaker 1]

Amen.

00:04:18,220 --> 00:04:22,760 [Speaker 0]

Here's another way to think about it: if Christmas zooms in

00:04:22,760 --> 00:05:44,820 [Speaker 0]

and focuses our attention on a manger in Bethlehem, Epiphany zooms out, showing us that what happened in Bethlehem affects the destiny of every person who has ever lived. If Christmas is the microscope, Epiphany is more like a telescope. Christmas is the microscope. It shows us the detail of Christ's incarnation. God dwells in the womb of a young Jewish girl and is born in an out-of-the-way Judean town on a particular night 2,000 years ago. Epiphany, then, is the telescope. It shows us the vastness of God's plan to gather up all things in this one, whose coming we celebrate at Christmas. Israel's Savior is the Savior of the entire created order. Luke tells us about a man named Simeon, who was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel. Simeon, full of the Holy Spirit, has a zoomed-out perspective. He bears witness to this truth when he visits the temple and holds the Christ child in his arms and says, "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory of your people Israel."

00:05:45,400 --> 00:06:41,912 [Speaker 0]

Simeon is awaiting the consolation of Israel, and when the day comes, he recognizes the miracle that God's salvation is available not just to Israel, but to all who call on his

name, across time and space, through Israel, to all generations, and to the ends of the earth.... each week at our prayer service, we affirm that God made of one blood all the peoples of the earth, and sent His Son to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near. And in that prayer, we pray that, uh, people everywhere might seek after Him and find Him, that He would bring the nations into His fold, that He would pour out His Spirit upon all flesh and hasten the coming day when all things are summed up in Him.

00:06:41,912 --> 00:07:28,912 [Speaker 0]

Now, I will confess that when I come to prayer each Wednesday, the desires this prayer expresses are not front of mind for me. I'm often struck by the, the clear note this prayer plays against the discordant chaos of my weekly to-do list. I'm fixated on this or that task, or distracted, or focused on myself, and praying this prayer and the others that we pray in our weekly prayer service invites me to turn my focus outward, to pray for people everywhere and the nations. Simply put, these prayers shift my perspective.

00:07:28,912 --> 00:07:44,111 [Speaker 0]

Each year, the season of Epiphany invites us to zoom out in exactly this way, to consider a handful of stories that illuminate Christ as the light of revelation to all who search for Him.

00:07:44,111 --> 00:08:06,072 [Speaker 0]

So take today's two appointed gospel texts. In both, we find people searching for Jesus. Matthew 2:1-12, which is like the quintessential Epiphany text, tells the story of the Magi searching for the Christ child, that they might honor and worship Him. That passage begins this way:

00:08:06,072 --> 00:08:35,172 [Speaker 0]

"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, Magi from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews? For we observed His star in the east and have come to pay Him homage.'" As the story progresses, the Magi find Jesus. Our prayer that people everywhere would seek after Him and find Him is answered here. But they don't return to Herod as Herod requests.

00:08:35,172 --> 00:08:42,732 [Speaker 0]

Instead, they proceed to foil King's H- King Herod's attempts to search for the Christ child, that he might kill Him.

00:08:42,732 --> 00:09:06,692 [Speaker 0]

In response, the king dispatches troops to search for the Christ child, to end His life. Matthew 2:16, a little bit further down: "When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the Magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the Magi."

00:09:06,692 --> 00:09:21,332 [Speaker 0]

The other gospel text for today is from Luke 2:42-51. Here, Luke recounts a peculiar episode from Jesus' adolescence when His parents lose track of Him. Do you recall this story?

00:09:21,332 --> 00:09:39,412 [Speaker 0]

And they search for Him for three days before finding Him in the temple. We read, "When the festival was ended..." This is the Passover festival that they traveled to annually. "When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. But

00:09:39,412 --> 00:10:04,092 [Speaker 0]

His parents, assuming He was in the group of travelers, went a day's journey. Then they started to look for Him among their relatives and friends. And when they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for Him." They find Jesus in His Father's house, where He knew to be, as His understanding of His vocation grew.

00:10:04,092 --> 00:10:18,791 [Speaker 0]

So those searching for Jesus, consider all of them, the Magi, the soldiers dispatched by King Herod, Jesus' own family. They all have different, even competing, sets of motives.

00:10:18,791 --> 00:10:59,392 [Speaker 0]

All pursue the one who will spend His earthly ministry inviting people to pursue Him, to drop what they had been doing, to upend their lives, and to follow Him as He travels to Jerusalem, of all places, into harm's way. He sets His face toward Jerusalem, that He might suffer for the sake of those who follow Him and those who seek to kill Him. Jesus, hidden in plain sight, offers us the same invitation today: "Seek me." There's not even a requirement that your motives are pure first, if the scriptures are any indication.

00:10:59,392 --> 00:13:05,476 [Speaker 0]

Several invitations and promises might come to mind here from our scriptures. Take, for example, Jesus' words in Matthew, chapter 7, "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." Paul makes a similar point in Acts, chapter 17. When he's ministering in the public square to Jews and Gentiles in Athens, he says, "His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward Him and find Him, though He is not far from any one of us. For in Him we live and move and exist." This is also true in the Old Testament, invitations to seek after God. "When you search for me, you will find me if you seek me with your whole heart," Jeremiah prophesies. " 'I will let you find me,' says the Lord." Isn't that great? " 'And I will restore your fortunes and gather you from the nations in all the places where I have driven you,' says the Lord, 'and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.' "... or the words of Isaiah, the prophet, "Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near." Or again, from the lectionary text assigned for today, the Old Testament text from Jeremiah 31 and the New Testament text, they have similar resonances of God gathering his people together. In Jeremiah, "See, I'm going to bring them from the land of the north, gather them from the farthest parts of the earth. Among them, the blind and the lame, those with child, and those in labor together, a great company, they shall return here. I will gather them up." Then in Ephesians chapter 1, "He has made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His, the pleasure that He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in Him, things in heaven and on earth."

00:13:05,476 --> 00:13:29,696 [Speaker 0]

So looking at all of these texts together presents a picture of people searching for the one who promises to gather His people together. And if we are, as Paul says, feeling our way toward a God who is not far from any of us to begin with, how come it so often seems like God is distant?

00:13:29,696 --> 00:13:34,576 [Speaker 0]

Why do we have so much trouble finding Him,

00:13:34,576 --> 00:13:45,376 [Speaker 0]

noticing Him? Perhaps it has something to do with the ways that our attention spans are shortening and are damaged.

00:13:45,376 --> 00:14:26,516 [Speaker 0]

The season of Epiphany helps us to zoom out, to remember that God is at work to bring nations into His fold. And this act of zooming out helps us to zoom in, to consider the part we play in extending the kind of hospitality that joins our Good Shepherd in His work of bringing the nations into His fold. When we zoom out from our limited attention spans and constant distractions, we can easily discern, or at least more easily discern, as Paul says in Philippians chapter 1, what really matters.

00:14:26,516 --> 00:15:55,736 [Speaker 0]

The lights are being preemptively dimmed. Thank you, Colby. [audience laughing] As we consider the zoomed out perspective of Epiphany, I thought it might be helpful to provide a visual aid. I want to draw our attention to the perspective of this painting, which has us looking down from above so that we can study the activity of an entire village. The 16th century painter, Pre- Pieter Bruegel the Elder, was known for his depictions of wintry scenes. Villages from his native Flanders serve as the settings for scenes from the Gospels. So this 1563 work, called The Adoration of the Magi. In it, Bruegel imagines the visit of the Magi occurring on a snowy day amidst the hustle and bustle of a 16th century European village. Bruegel imagines the story of visitors from afar finding Jesus, not in Bethlehem, but on his own doorstep. So if you're looking at the image, and it's not immediately clear where the Magi are or where Jesus is, don't worry, uh, that's kind of the point. Bruegel is known for concealing the main subjects of his paintings. He often hides them among cloaked villagers who bend under their burdens or brace against the cold. In this case, he relegates them to the corner of the painting.

00:15:55,736 --> 00:15:59,136 [Speaker 0]

Do you see them?

00:15:59,136 --> 00:16:04,935 [Speaker 0]

I added a circle to help you. [audience laughing] Uh,

00:16:05,016 --> 00:16:29,575 [Speaker 0]

Bruegel stuffs them in the bottom left of the frame. We might think of Bruegel as, uh, Where's Waldo, before Where's Waldo was cool. [audience laughing] We can barely make out the figures who kneel before the Christ child, whom Mary holds in her lap. Bruegel does something similar in a later work from 1566, called The Census at Bethlehem.

00:16:29,576 --> 00:16:50,276 [Speaker 0]

Again, the town swarms with activity, perhaps a helpful picture of our diffuse attention spans. The painting is busy, not unlike my brain on a Wednesday afternoon at prayer, not unlike our lives on any given week. The village is crowded, the villagers preoccupied,

00:16:50,276 --> 00:16:58,336 [Speaker 0]

and there in the midst of the busyness, Joseph leads Mary into town, seeking a place to rest.

00:16:58,336 --> 00:17:52,396 [Speaker 0]

I appreciate these images for several reasons, not least of which is their power to kind of retrain my attention. The high angle perspective invites the viewer to slow down and to notice Jesus underneath or behind or among those He comes to save. In His great mercy, He draws near to people who are going about the very tasks that distract them from noticing Him. Yes, He's easier to see if you zoom in, but without that elevated perspective, the perspective from above, the viewer can't see the weary world into which He enters. Zooming out at Epiphany not only helps us to keep the end in view when all things are gathered up in Christ, it also helps us to see the brokenness and pain of the world that He will one day gather up.

00:17:52,396 --> 00:18:02,096 [Speaker 0]

The titles of Bruegel's works tell us what to look for. The paintings themselves train us in how to look,

00:18:02,096 --> 00:18:26,912 [Speaker 0]

and there's a truth here that resonates for me, and, and maybe it does for you, too. It's not always that I don't know what I'm looking for, it's that life has become so crowded with brain rot and rage bait-... I'm so distracted that I've forgotten how to look. Lord, teach us how to see what really matters.

00:18:26,912 --> 00:19:08,172 [Speaker 0]

The irony is that only when we're afforded the opportunity to zoom out, to gaze down upon the scene from above, only then can we see that Jesus really is so close to those he comes to save. I'm reminded of the two instances of this phrase, "so close," that Scott Carnes crams into his dense, one-sentence, four-line poem titled His Death, Our Life. "Here's the sacred issue. He came so close to our decay, so close as to mix our nature newly with his own, and thus provide to our poor clay his endless resurrection."

00:19:08,232 --> 00:19:10,672 [Speaker 0]

I love the way that Carnes

00:19:10,672 --> 00:19:25,732 [Speaker 0]

renders the syntac- syntax of that final line. Look at it in isolation, "our poor clay, his resurrection." The two realities have come so close that no verb is strong enough to capture the link between them.

00:19:25,732 --> 00:19:42,772 [Speaker 0]

The question for us today is: How do we zoom out? How might we climb to the heights to get a glimpse from above, not so that we can be distant, but so that we can discern Christ's presence more clearly?

00:19:42,772 --> 00:19:52,272 [Speaker 0]

In other words, h- how can we zoom out regularly so that we can zoom in faithfully?

00:19:52,272 --> 00:20:00,552 [Speaker 0]

How can we respond in love to the needs of others? I think zooming out has a part to play in that.

00:20:00,552 --> 00:20:27,752 [Speaker 0]

And when we respond to the pain and to the brokenness of the world, how can we maintain this zoomed-out perspective so that when we come to the inevitable end of, of our strength, or, or we feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the need, how can we still keep Christ in view? How can we rest in the knowledge that all things will indeed find their end in Christ?

00:20:27,812 --> 00:20:49,512 [Speaker 0]

In the midst of pain and brokenness, how can we remember that Christ is indeed so close, that a day is coming when all things in heaven and on earth will be summed up, gathered up in him? Only he can provide our poor clay his endless resurrection.

00:20:49,512 --> 00:21:34,892 [Speaker 0]

The season we're entering into on the church calendar, again, beckons us to zoom out, to opt for the telescopic view, to adopt an eternal perspective so that we can discern what really matters. I'd also submit to you that this is true of the season that we are headed into as a congregation at Solid Rock. God has been good to us. We've grown as a congregation, and with this growth comes new opportunities to provide hospitality to others. You can see it, uh, pretty clearly by the banner in the lobby today. Christ is inviting us to participate with him as he brings the nations into his fold. Thanks be to God.

00:21:34,892 --> 00:22:22,292 [Speaker 0]

As we begin a new year, I, I want to encourage us all to pray. In the lobby today, there are several copies of the prayer liturgy that we have prayed together each week on Wednesday for the last decade plus. And I realize that many of you, uh, aren't able to join us on Wednesdays at noon. Although this is accessible on the website, sometimes having a hard copy is helpful, so those are available, with a special thanks to my mother for helping to collate those yesterday. I wanna encourage us to pray. In the back of that packet, there is a 30-day plan to read through the Psalms. And I invite you to take one of those as you leave today and join the congregation in prayer during the season of Epiphany.

00:22:22,292 --> 00:22:33,792 [Speaker 0]

I'm believing that these prayers, perhaps similar to the ways that Bruegel's paintings help us to zoom out, will help retrain our attention.

00:22:33,792 --> 00:22:50,172 [Speaker 0]

As often as I pray these prayers on Wednesdays, uh, I find that God's mercy consistently lifts me up out of the distraction of my life, provides me the kind of fresh perspective that is only achieved in his presence.

00:22:50,172 --> 00:23:00,532 [Speaker 0]

In addition to praying, perhaps you'd commit or- commit to, to fast a meal or even an entire day during the week, during the month of January.

00:23:00,532 --> 00:23:15,212 [Speaker 0]

Perhaps you'd be led to pray for our congregation at Solid Rock. And as you pray that people everywhere would seek after God and find him in that prayer for peace, perhaps you'd pray this same prayer on behalf of your neighborhood.

00:23:15,212 --> 00:23:36,492 [Speaker 0]

As we zoom out together and prepare for what God has, has for us, we acknowledge that he is indeed already active. In our prayer and fasting, we're simply aligning our hearts, our wills, our creativity, our giftings, and our imaginations with his ongoing activity in our midst.

00:23:36,492 --> 00:23:43,612 [Speaker 0]

So would you stand with me as we prepare to receive from the Lord today?

00:23:43,672 --> 00:23:47,692 [Speaker 0]

God, who is so close,

00:23:47,692 --> 00:23:52,212 [Speaker 0]

has drawn near to us today in these elements.

00:23:52,212 --> 00:24:09,372 [Speaker 0]

And as we do each week, we'll make two lines down these center aisles, and as you come forward, you'll hear the words spoken over you, "The body of Christ broken for you and the blood of Christ shed for you." You can take these elements and receive them on your own as you return to your seats.

00:24:09,372 --> 00:24:13,492 [Speaker 0]

As we do this in an attitude of prayer, I wanna lead us

00:24:13,492 --> 00:24:18,752 [Speaker 0]

in a prayer before we receive.

00:24:18,752 --> 00:24:21,312 [Speaker 0]

Lord, grant us

00:24:21,312 --> 00:24:25,072 [Speaker 0]

eyes to see what you're doing.

00:24:25,072 --> 00:24:33,792 [Speaker 0]

In imitation of Jesus, whom Mary found in his father's house, help us to discern what really matters.

00:24:33,852 --> 00:24:37,152 [Speaker 0]

Fill us with your Spirit.

00:24:37,152 --> 00:25:14,132 [Speaker 0]

Help us, we pray, to attend faithfully to one another and to the kind of prayer that aids our seeing from an eternal perspective. Above all, loving God, we rest in the hope of your promise that all things will one day be summed up in Christ, who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we might live to the praise of his glory. Amen. Would you join us at the table of the Lord today?