

BIBLE IN A YEAR

**THE READING PLAN IS TAKEN FROM
“READING GOD’S STORY: ONE-YEAR CHRONOLOGICAL PLAN” BY YOU VERSION**

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STUDY AND COMMENTARY

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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February 1, 2018
GOD'S ANSWER, PART 1

Readings for the day: Job 37, 38, 39, 40:1-5, Psalm 19

So this is the moment we've all been waiting for...God finally showing up! God finally speaking. God finally defending His actions, explaining things, letting us in on what He's been thinking. Except that's not what happens. Instead, we are given these words in Job 40:2, "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it." I remember being frustrated the first time I read them. Even a bit angry with God. But over the years I have come to a deeper understanding of who God is and who I am before Him. Literally, I am nothing. I am a sinner. I live in a constant state of rebellion against God and His ways. I am corrupt. Evil. Conceived in iniquity as Psalm 51 so eloquently puts it. I am totally depraved. Even my best thoughts and actions on my best day are poisoned by pride and selfishness. That is who I am without Christ. That is my natural state of being. That is how I was born into this world. Furthermore, even now that I am in Christ. Redeemed. Beloved. Given a new heart and new spirit. I am still finite. I am still dust and ashes. I cannot fathom why the sun rises each morning or the flowers bud each spring much less probe the mysteries of God's purposes. They remain unsearchable for me. Unfathomable. Beyond my limited understanding.

This is how God answers Job. There is no reason for Job's suffering. Not that he can understand. Not in this moment. Not while he's suffering and in pain. Not while he's demanding in his pride an audience before God. Not while he's upset and angry. Job must be humbled. He must come to an understanding of who he is and who he's addressing. "Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further." (Job 40:4-5) This is what I love about Job. This is what makes Job righteous and blameless in God's sight. This is ultimately why God will affirm His servant Job and judge Job's friends. Job is repentant. Job is humble. Job is contrite. When God finally answers him out of the whirlwind, Job responds with reverence, fear, and awe. The only appropriate response when we come before the Lord. He gets on his knees. He bows his head. He closes his mouth. He covers his eyes. He is finished speaking. There are no more words to say. God is present. God is here.

God is God and we are not. That's the essence of the message of the Book of Job and it's a tough one to swallow. The reality is we all like to pretend we are gods. Masters of our own universe. Captains of our own destiny. We like to pretend that we are in control when in fact we are not. God is moving in ways we cannot see or understand. He is doing things above and beyond us. He is working all things for His glory in the world. He has His purposes. We are simply His instruments. Beloved? Yes. Cherished? Yes. Esteemed? Yes. But our relationship with God comes with responsibilities. Our adoption into God's family as His sons and daughters comes with a certain set of expectations. Though we are heirs to all things in Christ, we ourselves are not Christ. Though the Father has given us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, we are not to assume this makes us into gods ourselves. Humility and repentance are the key to a well-lived life before God and Job shows us the way.

February 2, 2018
GOD'S ANSWER, PART 2

Readings for the day: Job 40:6-24, 41, 42, Psalm 29

One of the versions of the Bible that I love to read, especially when it comes to poetry, is the Message. The translator, Eugene Peterson, has this way of making the text come alive for me. Listen to how He translates some of these final verses of Job.

“Look at the land beast, Behemoth. I created him as well as you. Grazing on grass, docile as a cow— Just look at the strength of his back, the powerful muscles of his belly. His tail sways like a cedar in the wind; his huge legs are like beech trees. His skeleton is made of steel, every bone in his body hard as steel. Most magnificent of all my creatures, but I still lead him around like a lamb! The grass-covered hills serve him meals, while field mice frolic in his shadow...And when the river rages he doesn't budge, stolid and unperturbed even when the Jordan goes wild. But you'd never want him for a pet— you'd never be able to housebreak him!” (Job 40:15-24 MSG)

“Or can you pull in the sea beast, Leviathan, with a fly rod and stuff him in your creel? Can you lasso him with a rope, or snag him with an anchor? Will he beg you over and over for mercy, or flatter you with flowery speech? Will he apply for a job with you to run errands and serve you the rest of your life? Will you play with him as if he were a pet goldfish? Will you make him the mascot of the neighborhood children?...What hope would you have with such a creature? Why, one look at him would do you in! If you can't hold your own against his glowering visage, how, then, do you expect to stand up to me? Who could confront me and get by with it? I'm in charge of all this—I run this universe!” (Job 41:1-11 MSG)

The most important reason we read the Word of God is to be reminded of our place in this world. Because the reality is we often act at times like we CAN tame Behemoth! Or fish for Leviathan! We believe deep in our bones that nothing's impossible for us as long as we set our best minds and best resources and best efforts towards a single goal. Remember what we read in Genesis 11 about the Tower of Babel? “And the Lord said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.” (Genesis 11:6 ESV) We fundamentally believe – in our pride and arrogance – that we can ascend to heaven. We don't need God. We can tame the world. Whether on a global, local, or even individual scale.

The Bible reminds us of our limits. It reminds of the boundaries of our existence. It is good. It is right. It is important. So many people read Job and are frustrated that he gets no straight answer from God. But in expecting or even demanding such an answer, we make the same mistake Job made! We put God in the wrong. We condemn Him so that we may be in the right. (Job 40:8) Would that we learn to respond to God like Job did at the end! Repenting in dust and ashes before the Lord! Only then can we expect the Lord to restore our fortunes, heal our land, revive our nation.

February 3, 2018
SPIRITUAL HEROES

Readings for the day: Exodus 1, 2, 3, 4

The Exodus story is one of the most powerful in human history. It is the great national narrative of the Jewish people. It brought hope to millions of African-Americans living under slavery and later, segregation in the Deep South. It inspired some of our greatest music, creating a whole new genre called "negro spirituals" that we continue to sing to this day. Artists, authors, and movie producers have all found it compelling. And it continues to galvanize those who suffer in captivity and bondage around the world.

It's easy as we dive in to focus on Moses. His miraculous deliverance at birth. His attempt to deliver his people by murdering an Egyptian. His flight from Egypt. His encounter with God at the burning bush. And then his return back to his people as he takes up the mantle of leadership. Often overlooked is the courageous faith of the women who make all this possible.

First, the midwives. Shiphrah and Puah are two of the most underrated heroes in the Bible. Their faithfulness to God placed them in incredible danger and yet they refused to obey Pharaoh's command. "But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live." (Ex. 1:17) Their actions saved who knows how many children in Israel and God honored their faithfulness. "So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families." (Exodus 1:20-21) As an aside, I've heard many Christians question how God could honor their deceit since they lied to Pharaoh. This clearly betrays a lack of understanding of what it takes to survive in such a situation. Most who question have never experienced the brutalities of slavery, bondage, and oppression. They are unfamiliar with work-gangs, hard labor, and cruel task-masters who whip and abuse. The more we seek to understand the harsh circumstances they lived in every day, the more we can appreciate their bravery.

Second, the older sister. When Moses was born, his mother hid him for three months. But eventually the time came where she had to let him go. She placed him in a little basket-boat on the Nile, probably with the hope that somehow, someday his life would be preserved. His older sister followed the boat as it floated down the river. When she saw Pharaoh's daughter discover the basket, she immediately ran up to offer to help. Again, this is an incredible act of courage. For all she knew Pharaoh's daughter would drown her little brother right then and there and perhaps that is exactly what would have happened except for her swift actions. "Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?' And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Go.'" So the girl went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "Because," she said, "I drew him out of the water." (Exodus 2:7-10) Not only does she save Moses but she is able to reunite him with his mother while he is being nursed! It's an incredible act of faith for such a young girl!

Third, Pharaoh's daughter. I've always wondered why she rescued Moses from the river? What motivated her to lift him out of the little basket and adopt him as her own? Did she see the same thing in Moses that his mother saw? "The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child..." (Exodus 2:2) Or did she just take pity on a helpless baby? No matter her motivations, she too was acting courageously. Defying her father's orders to save this Hebrew child. Though she did not know God, she still was used by God to play a specific role in His salvation plan for His people.

It's amazing to think about, isn't it? The string of events that led to Moses appearing before God at the burning bush? It makes me think about my own life. What simple, yet courageous acts of faith am I being called to engage in that will further the Kingdom of God in this world?

February 5, 2018
NO OTHER GODS

Readings for the day: Exodus 5, 6, 7, 8, 9

Too often we make the mistake of reading Scripture through 21st century eyes. We subconsciously assume the people we read about think like we do. But there is a massive cultural gap between 21st century America with our ideals of freedom and liberty and justice for all and ancient Egypt where Pharaoh was worshiped as a god. Pharaoh did not consider himself to be a man like any other man. He ruled the greatest empire at the time. His domain stretched for thousands of miles in every direction. He was wealthy beyond belief. His armies were feared. His power unquestioned. He truly believed he was divine. He truly believed his people existed to serve his needs and his purposes. So it comes as no surprise when Moses approaches him with a demand from Yahweh to let the Hebrews go that Pharaoh would have laughed. "Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover, I will not let Israel go." (Exodus 5:2) For all Pharaoh knew, this Yahweh was just another small-time, tribal god who had no power. After all, Yahweh had allowed His people to become slaves for hundreds of years. He was not a god to be respected, much less feared.

The Exodus story has so many layers and we make much of the drama between Pharaoh and Moses. But the real story is the conflict between Pharaoh and Yahweh. Yahweh is using Pharaoh as an instrument to reveal His true glory to the world. He says as much in Exodus 9:13-16, "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Rise up early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, 'Let my people go, that they may serve me. For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth. For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.'" The Apostle Paul underscores this same idea in Romans 9:14-18, "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'" So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'" So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills." The reality is God is not going to relent with Pharaoh until he reaches a place of complete and total submission. God will not stop with the plagues until Pharaoh is completely broken and grasps the difference between himself and Yahweh, the Lord of the Universe. So plague after plague after plague rains down. The people of Egypt suffer. Their lands and livestock are largely destroyed. Fear begins to permeate the land as the Egyptians realize that the god they've come face to face with is no tribal deity! He is Yahweh! He is the Lord! He is God!

And God isn't just revealing Himself to the Egyptians, He is re-introducing Himself to His people. "Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord.'" (Exodus 6:6-8) After four hundred years of silence, God is once again on the move. He is fulfilling His promises in His time. Now some may ask why God waited so long? What about the people who don't get to experience the miracle of the Exodus? What about those who had lived and died under the lash of the Egyptians? Here WE come face to face with the fact that our God is no tribal god. His primary purpose is NOT to meet our needs. It's NOT to make sure we remain safe and happy and live a blessed life. No, God has a greater plan in mind and that is to reveal His glory to the world. This is why God delivered His people. To show forth His power and glory to the world. To leave no doubt as to who is God and who is not.

So the question then comes to us...will we believe this God? Will we trust this God? Will we worship this God? Will we harden our hearts like Pharaoh? Will we cling to our pride and continue to act like "little gods?" Or perhaps our spirits are broken by the pain we've suffered in this world. Perhaps belief is beyond us because of how beaten down we feel. Will we pray the prayer Thomas prayed, "Lord, help my unbelief?" Will we trust Christ above even our own thoughts, feelings, and fears?

February 6, 2018
HARDENING OF THE HEART

Readings for the day: Exodus 10, 11, 12, 13

Today we have to grapple with one the deepest mysteries in all of Scripture. God hardening Pharaoh's heart. Before we even get started, let's acknowledge the obvious. We hate this truth. It runs counter to everything we've been raised to believe about free will, everyone getting a choice, God loving everyone, etc. It calls into question God's justice. God's righteousness. How could a righteous God harden someone's heart to the point where they are kept from saving faith? And yet, if we are courageous enough to take the text at face value, we are left with no other conclusion.

"Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants..." (Ex. 10:1)

"But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go." (Ex. 10:20)

"But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go." (Ex. 10:27)

"Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh, and the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land." (Ex. 11:10)

God is relentless with this man. He will not let him repent. He will not let him escape judgment. He will not let him give in until his nation lies in ruins. God will not let up until there is no doubt who is God and who is not. Now this is hard for us. This is a different side to God that we aren't used to. A God who reigns over the affairs of humanity. A God who rules over the universe with a firm hand. A God who is to be feared as much as loved. So again, the question is pressed...how could a righteous God harden someone's heart to the point where they are kept from saving faith?

The key is how we define righteousness. Do we define it from a human perspective? Or a Biblical one? According to Scripture, God's highest aim is NOT the salvation of His people. As important as this is, it is merely the means God chooses to achieve a higher end. What is that "higher end?" The full display of God's power and glory and majesty and sovereignty over all creation. God's greatest aim is to fill the earth with His glory. His grand design calls for all creation to honor His great name. This is the purpose for which we were created and it is clearly revealed in the Exodus narrative.

"But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them." (Ex. 7:3-5)

"Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the Lord." (Ex. 10:1-2)

"Then the Lord said to Moses, "Pharaoh will not listen to you, that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 11:9)

And the Apostle Paul affirms God's purposes when he looked back on the Exodus story. "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." (Rom. 9:17)

The point is clear. God will make His name known. And He chooses to make His name known through "vessels of mercy" (His people) and "vessels of wrath" (not His people). And lest we think this somehow compromises God's justice or righteousness or goodness or it just isn't fair; we have to remember our condition before God. All of us are dead in our trespasses. All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. All of us deserve death and the torments of hell forever. We are in NO position – broken, sinful, and rebellious as we are – to pass judgment on God. God is free to choose to use whom He wills in whatever way He wills and this in no way compromises His integrity.

So what does this mean for us? Does it mean we should be scared of God? Does it mean we are at the mercy of a God who is arbitrary and capricious? Not at all. In Jesus Christ, God has provided the perfect Passover Lamb! He Himself has become the sacrifice that saves! His blood delivers us from the angel of death! And because we have no idea whom God has chosen, we should go forth and gladly, even boldly, share this good news with the world!

February 7, 2018
GROWING UP

Readings for the day: Exodus 14, 15, 16, 17, 18

I am not a big fan of whining. Ask my children and they will tell you that one of the things that really spins me up as a dad is when they whine. I am not sure why it is such a hot button for me. Perhaps it was how I was raised. Perhaps it's because of how hard I've had to work my whole life. Perhaps it's because whining and complaining is just not something I tend to do. It's such a tender spot for me that every time I read Exodus, I find myself getting a little frustrated, even angry, with God's people. They complain ALL THE TIME!

"They said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." (Ex. 14:11-12)

"And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" (Ex. 15:24)

"And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." (Ex. 16:2-3)

"Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" (Ex. 17:2-3)

These are the same people who have literally watched God part the Red Sea! Literally watched God fight for them against the Egyptians! Literally watched God rain manna and quail down from heaven! Literally watched God bring water from a rock! How can they not believe?

This year, God has given me a new insight. As I'm reading, I find myself paying particular attention to how God responds. I am definitely more like Moses. I get frustrated. Angry. Upset. The whining and complaining gets on my nerves. But then I look at how God responds.

"The Lord said to Moses, "Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground. And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen...Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great power that the Lord used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses." (Ex. 14:15-18, 30-31)

"And Moses cried to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the Lord made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, saying, "If you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, your healer." (Ex. 15:25-26)

"Then the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not...And the Lord said to Moses, "I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'" (Ex. 16:4, 11-12)

"And the Lord said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink..." (Ex. 17:5-6)

It really is remarkable when you stop to think about it. God meeting the needs of His people over and over again. And while it's extremely difficult to discern the tone of God's voice as He speaks, I imagine it is sometimes tender. Sometimes stern. Sometimes there's probably an edge to it and other times God is deeply compassionate. The point of it all is that these are the actions of a loving Father who is raising up His children to know Him and love Him and serve Him in this world. God is forming a family. He is teaching them to trust Him. To lean on Him. To believe in Him. He gives them tests along the way so they can learn about the great faithfulness of God for themselves. Deliverance through the Red Sea. Egyptians and Amalekites destroyed. Manna every day. Quail every night. Water from rocks. Purified water from a bitter spring. This is how God is raising His children. Even to this day.

So back to whining. If I'm honest, I'm a whiner as well. I do complain a lot. Deep down in my heart, I struggle all the time with frustrations and fears. Failures and uncertainty. I have these longings that go unfulfilled. I have these needs that go unmet. I often feel like I deserve more. Like I'm entitled because of all the hard work I've put in. All these emotions lie below the surface if I am totally transparent and how does God respond? He puts me to the test. He places me in situations where I have no choice but to cry out to Him. Why? Because He's teaching me every single day what it means to be His child. To grow into His likeness and image. To become the man He's created and called me to be.

February 8, 2018

MT. SINAI

Readings for the day: Exodus 19, 20, 21

Today's reading represents a hinge point in the Book of Exodus. We move from sweeping epic to Israelite case law and it's easy to start to skip over this part. I remember my eyes glazing over during this section the first several times I read through the Bible in a year. However, if we slow down and read carefully, some wonderful truths are revealed.

First, a look at the big picture. Israel arrives at Mt. Sinai as a rag-tag group of folks with no national identity or charter. The only reason they've made it this far is due to the miraculous intervention of God. He saved them. He defeated the Egyptians. He fed them. He watered them. He has met every need. His goal is to get them to Sinai in one piece where He will begin to teach them what it means to be His people. Once they are at Mt. Sinai, God comes down to meet them face to face. The revelation of God is so intense, the mountain shakes and burns. The people's hearts melt and they tremble in fear. God's holiness is so fierce that the people must be protected from it lest they die. Then God speaks. He writes the Ten Commandments with His own finger on tablets of stone. He dictates His laws to Moses and in doing so, he shapes a nation.

The laws God issues are revelatory in nature. They are similar and yet critically different than the laws of the nations around them. Almost all societies, even ancient ones, have laws prohibiting murder, stealing, etc. Old Testament law is unique, however, in that it protects women, children, and families. It restricts revenge by instituting the principle of *lex talionis* – otherwise known as “an eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth” - thus making justice proportional. Furthermore, it makes slavery a voluntary arrangement. Available for those who cannot pay their debts. Freedom was a guarantee unless the slave himself chose otherwise. Protections were built in to prevent abuse and slave trading was punishable by death. “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.” (Ex. 21:16) These are massive advances in human rights and set the nation of Israel apart from the other nations around them.

This is exactly God's point, by the way. Remember, in “Abraham” all the nations of the earth would be blessed. It will be through Abraham and his descendants (now starting to “outnumber” the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore) that the world will come to know Yahweh is God. Pharaoh's already learned this lesson the hard way. Other nations now have the opportunity to learn from Israel. To model their own national life and laws after the Law of God. In giving Israel His Law, God is setting them up to serve as a light to the nations. An example to the Gentiles. He wants the nations of the earth to see what life looks like in His Kingdom. When Israel is faithful to the Law, the nations will flock to her. She will experience blessing and peace and prosperity. When she disobeys the Law, she will be judged and punished thereby continuing to serve God's purposes as He makes an example of them in His wrath. The point of it all is that God is now in relationship with Israel and Israel with God. She is bound to Him through His saving grace and He will never let her go.

February 9, 2018

GOD'S LAW

Readings for the day: Exodus 22, 23, 24

Someone recently asked a great question, "If God were to come down and speak to us today, would his laws be the same or changed for the current day?" The laws we read about in Exodus, or later in Leviticus, definitely seem foreign and strange to us. They have to do with the customs of the ancient near east and while they represent in many cases significant advances in human rights for the time, we don't often see them as such because of how far human civilization has advanced.

One key to answering this question can be found in the difference between Exodus 20:1 and 20:22. In Exodus 20:1, God gives the Ten Commandments. They are written on stone tablets by his very finger. They are words directly from the mouth of God. However, in Exodus 20:22, a shift takes place. Now Moses will become the lawgiver. He will be the one to flesh out the details of the laws that will govern the daily life of Israel. It's one of the main reasons the people of God historically have kept the Ten Commandments but not necessarily kept all the laws of Moses as they are written.

A second key to answering this question is pushing beyond the letter of the laws themselves to the principles they represent. This is where our study of these laws becomes very fruitful even for our own 21st century American context. For example, it's worth considering the dignity the Hebrews assigned to slaves, women, children, and families. Again, for their day, these were utterly unique among ancient law codes and represent a trajectory towards modern human rights laws. Or consider the laws of proportional justice which limit revenge by making the punishment fit the crime. This principle still undergirds much of our modern legal system today. The principle of restitution is another one we understand and practice. As does God's concern for widows, orphans, and the poor.

Let's take one example that is a political hot button today. Immigration. Refugees. I know these are somewhat separate issues – certainly legally – but what does the Bible have to say about the principles that should shape our policies in these areas? Consider the following verses, "You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 22:21) "You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 23:9) "Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed." (Ex. 23:12) God makes it very clear to His people that they should treat the immigrants within their midst with compassion and mercy and kindness and care. Why? Because this is how God treated them when they were immigrants in Egypt.

Fundamentally, the most important truth that undergirds the entire law of God is this idea that we should treat one another as we have been treated by God Himself. We should extend to others the same kindness, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness that God has shown us. We should deal with one another righteously not just because "God said so" but because God DID so with us! This is what it means to keep and follow God's law and it's something Jesus Himself will affirm in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) which, by the way, is simply a restatement of the Ten Commandments.

February 10, 2018

THIN SPACES

Readings for the day: Exodus 25, 26, 27, 28

The ancient Celts believed there were actual physical locations here on earth where the veil between this world and the next grew very thin. In these “thin spaces”, one would often encounter God or angels or have some kind of visitation from the spirit world. “Heaven and earth are only three feet apart but in the thin spaces that distance gets even shorter.” So the old Celtic saying goes. It’s the first thing that came to mind when I read Exodus 24:9-11 yesterday. “Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.” Can you imagine? Sitting down on the top of Mt. Sinai and dining with God? Entering a “thin space” between this world and the next where the ground beneath your feet changes shape and you catch a glimpse of the glory of heaven? It’s amazing.

Today we read about the construction of the Tabernacle. It’s easy to get lost in all the talk of cubits and curtain loops. It’s easy to lose sight of the bigger picture when we’re reading about the construction of lamp stands and the ark of the covenant. But if we take a step back and survey the scene, what we realize is that God is literally giving Israel a portable “thin space!” Wherever they go, He will be with them! Wherever they find themselves, God will be there. They will have the opportunity to meet with Him. Hear His voice. Worship at His feet. “And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst...There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.” (Ex. 25:8, 22)

One of the great things I love about Christianity is that it’s not bound to any particular time or place. Our God is no simple tribal god. He rules the universe. He reigns over all He has made. The earth is His and the fullness thereof. We don’t have to “go anywhere” to meet with God because He makes sure to “tabernacle” with us. This is what the Apostle John means when he writes, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14) The Greek word for “dwelt” means “tabernacled” which means Jesus Himself is now the tabernacle of God! Jesus Himself is the “thin space” between this world and the next! Jesus is Immanuel – God with us - no matter where we go or where we find ourselves.

February 12, 2018
DOES GOD CHANGE HIS MIND?

Readings for the day: Exodus 29, 30, 31, 32

Exodus 32 is an incredibly important chapter in the Bible. It speaks to humanity's rebellious nature. The holiness of God. The power of prayer. The consequences of sin. It is deep and profound and a careful reader will absolutely marvel at what she reads.

First, humanity's rebellious nature. We are so impatient. We have such a hard time delaying gratification. When Moses is delayed on top of the mountain – remember there is still fire and smoke coming from the summit – the people decide to take matters into their own hands. They decide to worship God as they please rather than stay true to what God demands. Aaron, in an incredible display of weak leadership, plays to the crowd's desires. He fashions a calf. Builds an altar. Declares a feast unto the Lord. This is not what God wants. Now we do need to remember that this scene is playing out in two different locations. Moses is hearing from God on top of Mt. Sinai. He has yet to return and give the people the law. Aaron is in charge down below, trying to keep the peace. The people honestly have no idea what's happened to Moses. Perhaps they even fear he is dead. So let's assume the best. They want to worship God. They want to show their devotion. They want to let God know how much they love Him and are thankful for His deliverance. But their failure to wait. Their failure to worship God as He deserves and as He demands is a critical mistake. (One we still too often unfortunately repeat...)

So the camera zooms up to the top of the mountain where God and Moses are still deep in conversation. The Lord spoke to Moses: "Go down at once! For your people you brought up from the land of Egypt have acted corruptly..." (Ex. 32:7) God is angry. His righteous wrath is now aroused. The sin of the people has encroached on His holiness. It offends Him deeply. Viscerally. Their sin is a stench to Him. So He tells Moses – this is important – "your" people whom "you" brought up from the land of Egypt have committed a great sin. God is disowning them as he prepares to destroy them and start all over with Moses. "The Lord also said to Moses: "I have seen this people, and they are indeed a stiff-necked people. Now leave Me alone, so that My anger can burn against them and I can destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." (Ex. 32:9-10) Essentially, God is saying to Moses, I will wipe them out and make you a new Abraham. I will reset the deck yet again and start over with the one faithful man I can find.

Moses is quick to respond. And he prays one of the most important prayers in human history. "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'" And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people." (Ex. 32:11-14) Moses is quick to remind God whose people He's really talking about. These are God's people. They are the people God delivered by His own hand. If God were to destroy them, God's reputation would suffer. The Egyptians – before whom God has made Himself known – would begin to doubt and question Him. The promise God had given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would become null and void. This is an incredible prayer of faith. Praying not for mercy but trusting God to be true to Himself. Trusting God to stay true to His character. Trusting God to stay faithful to His promises. There is no question in Moses' mind that God will remain true to Himself and so Moses prays his prayer in faith.

What are we to make of such a prayer? Is Moses talking God down? Is he talking God off the ledge? Does Moses prayer enact some kind of change in God? Is God the kind of God who could lose control in anger and lash out at His people? These are really important questions to wrestle with as we read. What I believe is

happening here is something similar to what took place between Abraham and God when they discussed the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. God is specifically inviting us into a deep relationship with Himself. A relationship where our prayers are real. Where the thoughts and desires and emotions of our hearts are taken seriously by God. God is still free to act as He sees fit. He still destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah after all. But He did rescue Lot and his family so perhaps Abraham's prayer was answered? Here Moses intercedes on behalf of the people. He steps into the gap God provides and prays in great faith. His prayer thus creates a new situation to which God responds. No longer are we just talking about God's holiness and the people's sin. Now we have a man of faith stepping into the gap. A mediator who intercedes. And God honors the intercessor by relenting from the disaster He had prepared. (By the way, the Book of Hebrews picks up this imagery and assigns Jesus the role of eternal intercessor before the Father.)

Moses' intercession doesn't mean there aren't consequences for sin. Moses comes down the mountain. He shatters the tablets at the foot of the mountain. Grounds the calf to dust and makes the people drink it. There is death as the Levites have to kill almost three thousand people before the sinful revelry settles down. And the chapter closes with a plague sent from the Lord as well as this promise, "Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them."

What do we learn from all this? God takes worship seriously. We are to worship Him in the way He demands and the way He deserves. God takes prayer seriously. Intercessory prayer is powerful and effective when it comes from the lips of a righteous man or woman. God takes sin seriously. He will not let us escape the consequences of our actions though He does provide a way – through Jesus – for us to be forgiven and reconciled to Him.

February 13, 2018
THE NAME OF GOD

Readings for the day: Exodus 33, 34, 35, 36

The importance of these readings from the Book of Exodus cannot be overstated. God is renewing His commitment to Israel. Despite their sin. Despite their rebellious ways. He has determined to be their God. He has determined to do something miraculous in and through them that will stun the nations of the earth. He will drive out their enemies. He will secure for them a homeland. He will do for them what has not been done for any other people. For they are set apart. They are His chosen ones.

The conversation between Moses and God which begins at the end of chapter 33 and finishes in chapter 34 is of particular importance. God begins chapter 33 by telling Moses He will not be going with them. His holiness would consume them along the way for the people are stiff-necked and stubborn in their sin. Instead, He will send an angel to accomplish the mission He's started. This isn't enough for Moses. Jump down to 33:12ff and Moses again intercedes on behalf of the people. He asks God to remain faithful. To be present among them. To teach them His ways and show them the right paths to walk. God responds favorably to Moses' prayer. But then Moses gets even more bold. He asks to personally witness the glory of God. Perhaps he needs assurance from God? The text doesn't tell us. But God indeed passes before Moses and in one of the most important passages in all of Scripture reveals His character and nature.

"The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped." (Ex. 34:5-8)

From this point forward, whenever Israel is in trouble. Whenever Israel has fallen into sin. Whenever Israel suffers. Whenever they are oppressed and in need. They call on the "name of the Lord" and are delivered. They call on the "name of the Lord" knowing with full assurance that the Lord's name is mercy. Grace. Steadfast love. Faithfulness. They call on Him knowing He is slow to anger and keeps his steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love Him in return. They call on Him knowing He is just and will by no means give the guilty a pass. They call on Him trusting Him to be true to Himself. True to how He revealed Himself to Moses. True to what He has declared about Himself. Over and over again, we will see these verses referenced throughout the Old Testament. Every time the people of God call on the "name of the Lord" to be saved, they are looking back to this particular meeting where God showed Himself to Moses.

Fast forward several centuries to the Apostle Paul. Writing to the church in Rome. A church that is struggling. A church that is suffering. A church that is being persecuted. Torn apart by division from within over the Jew/Gentile question. In the midst of his letter to them, Paul writes these words, "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." He's quoting from the Old Testament prophet Joel who himself is looking back to this encounter between God and Moses in the Exodus. The difference, of course, is Paul is referring to Jesus. "The radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature..." according to Hebrews 1:3. In Jesus, we have seen God's glory in all its fullness! In Jesus, God has revealed Himself truly to be merciful and gracious and steadfast in love and faithfulness! In Jesus, God has promised to be with us even to the end of the age! Thanks be to God!

February 14, 2018
BEZALEL AND OHALIAB

Readings for the day: Exodus 37, 38, 39, 40

You just finished Exodus! Well done, friends! You've already knocked out three of the longest books of the Bible and are well on your way to meeting your goal of reading the Bible this year! If you've fallen a little behind...no worries! Keep plugging away! Remember, reading the Bible in a year is somewhat arbitrary. It's just as good to read the Bible in six months or a year and a half! God honors all the time we spend in His Word.

Before we leave Exodus, I do want to give a shout out to two guys who are often overlooked. Bezalel and Oholiab are just as critical to this story as Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and all the rest. Without their God-given talent and ability and passion for craftsmanship, we wouldn't know much about how the early Israelites worshiped. Without their attention to detail and ability to shape gold and wood and cloth, we wouldn't have the Tabernacle and all its furnishings. No ark. No altar. No golden lamp stand. You may recall back in Exodus 31, God saying these words, "See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft. And behold, I have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. And I have given to all able men ability, that they may make all that I have commanded you: the tent of meeting, and the ark of the testimony, and the mercy seat that is on it, and all the furnishings of the tent, the table and its utensils, and the pure lamp stand with all its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the basin and its stand, and the finely worked garments, the holy garments for Aaron the priest and the garments of his sons, for their service as priests, and the anointing oil and the fragrant incense for the Holy Place. According to all that I have commanded you, they shall do."

It's so easy to get focused on Moses or Aaron or Joshua or some other great leader in Israel's history. It's so easy to assume they are the focus of the story. They are the ones gifted by God. They are the ones called by God. They are the ones whom God uses to accomplish His great work. But Bezalel and Oholiab are quick to remind us that ALL of us have been gifted by God in some way and ALL of us are called to use our gifts for His glory. It's not just the pastors or the missionaries who are the heroes. It is the people of God exercising the gifts God has given each of them for the up building of the Body of Christ and the glory of God's Kingdom. When we fail to exercise our gifts or diminish our gifts in any way, we lose out on at least part of what God has planned for us. Think about how impoverished we would be if there had never been a Bezalel or Oholiab? Think about the impact on the worshiping life of Israel if there were no craftsmen around to make all God had ordained?

Now think about our life together. Think about our worship together. What gifts do you bring? Is it the gift of music? The gift of prayer? The gift of friendship? The gift of production? The gift of preaching? The gift of teaching? The gift of serving? If you are a Christian, you have the same Spirit of God filling you that filled Bezalel. This same Spirit imparts all the gifts and talents we need to worship and serve God as He demands. So how are you exercising your gift? How are you seeking to use your gift to build up others in your church family? In your home? In your neighborhood? At work or at school? May God fill you with the same passion that He once gave to Bezalel and Oholiab and may you then put your gifts and talents in service to God's mission in the world!

February 15, 2018

THE LAW

Readings for the day: Leviticus 1, 2, 3, 4

Today is our first day in Leviticus. One of the hardest books for Christians to read and stay engaged with in the Bible. And yet, if we are willing to put in the work, we'll learn some amazing things about God's relationship with His people.

The first thing we need to understand as we approach this book is that it clearly delineates what we call the "ceremonial" law of Israel. Laws governing sacrifice. Laws governing worship. Laws governing what is holy and unholy, clean and unclean. Most of these laws were fulfilled once and for all by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. (In fact, all of the sacrifices we'll read about in Leviticus foreshadow the sacrifice of the Messiah.) Because the ceremonial laws were fulfilled, Christians no longer are required to keep them. However, this doesn't mean we can dismiss Leviticus as some antiquated piece of history not worth our time. Embedded in this book are important tenets of what we call "moral" law which still is instructive and binding on us today. The key is know which is which and how to separate out the two.

A second thing we need to remember as we approach this book is where it falls in the narrative. The people have just been saved from Egypt. They are standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai. God is still speaking to Moses. And the burning question that is on everyone's minds is this...How can a holy God dwell with an unholy people? If God is literally going to live among them, how will they survive? The answer is sacrifice. The first seven chapters of this book describe in great detail the sacrifices that were necessary to purify the people. Animal sacrifices. Bulls. Sheep. Goats. Birds. Grain offerings. Always with oil and salt. Peace offerings. Sin offerings. Blood being thrown against the altar. Animals dissected into little pieces. It must have been hard and fairly gruesome work. The fires must have burned continually. The smoke from the sacrifices rising into the heavens in a continual stream. (It must have smelled like Greeley...all the time! How that's pleasing to the Lord, I'll never know!)

What's the point of it all? To remind us every hour of every day that the penalty for our sin is death. To remind us that as bad as the stench of sacrifice may be, the stench of our sin is much, much worse. The reality is we don't take our sin seriously enough. We don't take God's holiness seriously enough. We like to think we aren't all that bad. The baseline for many of us is that we're pretty good people. Flawed? Yes. Imperfect? Sure. Sinner? Okay. Antiquated term but we'll go with it. God sees us – absent Christ – much differently. He sees creatures utterly deformed by their sin. Barely resembling the glory He initially created in them. He sees creatures living in complete and total rebellion against His perfect will. Creatures who are so full of selfish, prideful ambition and deceit. He sees creatures who are enslaved. Under bondage. Creatures with a terminal illness. Weak and emancipated by their sin. When He looks down from heaven on the earth, all He sees is death. Decay.

Destruction. Our lives are a shell of what He intended. And for Him to enter into this world. Dwell with His people. In the perfection of His holiness and glory is to risk destroying them utterly. For God is a consuming fire. (Deut. 4:24) So God institutes the sacrificial system in order to give God's people an opportunity to purify themselves so they may live their lives before the Lord without fear. And because the sacrifices are animals, they have to be repeated with regularity in order to maintain the people's purity before God.

All this changes with the coming of Jesus. All this changes when Jesus – the perfect sacrifice – goes to the cross. Once and for all, He satisfies God's holy justice. Once and for all, He purifies God's people. Once and for all, He pays the penalty for the people's sin. I love how the Book of Hebrews puts it, "But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant." (Heb. 9:11-15)

February 16, 2018
IMPORTANCE OF SACRIFICE

Readings for the day: Leviticus 5, 6, 7

One of the biggest challenges in reading the Bible is keeping in mind the larger story. It is so easy to get down in the weeds whether we're talking about the laws of Leviticus or the statistics/genealogies in Numbers or the tragic stories in Judges. It's easy to lose sight of the big picture and how each of the books of the Bible ties together to illustrate a seamless whole.

The basic story the Bible tells happens in four acts. Act 1: Creation. God creating the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. Everything is good. Everything is right. Everything is beautiful. Humanity reigns and rules with God over all He has made. Act 2: Fall. Humanity rebels and decides to go it's own way. Sin enters the world. Creation falls into ruin. Death. Disease. Pain. Suffering. All become commonplace. Act 3: Redemption. God doesn't abandon His creation. Out of love He reaches out in rescue. Deliverance. Salvation. The culmination of His plan is Christ who defeats Sin and Death once and for all on the cross. Act 4: Glorification. The reunion of the heavens and the earth. The joining back together of the two spheres of life that were separated by the Fall. Jesus' resurrection is the firstfruits of this reality and His promise is that He will return one day to make all things new.

It's important to note that Acts 2 and 3 are running simultaneously throughout the Scriptures. From Genesis to Revelation, we see humanity rebel over and over against her God. We also see God's grace on display as He relentlessly pursues those He loves. The sacrificial system instituted by Moses in Leviticus is one movement, if you will, within Act 3. It is not the final movement. Rather, it points beyond itself to the climax to come when Jesus will become the Perfect, Spotless Lamb. This entire system with it's different offerings and different requirements and specific instructions is given as a means to prepare God's people for Christ. To get them ready so they will recognize Him when He appears. It's a system designed to prepare the heart and soul for the culmination of God's redemptive purposes.

By reading and reflecting on Leviticus, we are reminded over and over again of the extreme penalty our sin deserves. Death seems to reign throughout this book. You almost can't turn around without stumbling over the carcasses of bulls, rams, sheep, goats, and turtledoves. The sacrificial fires would have been kept burning day and night as the people of Israel – now numbering in the hundreds of thousands – came to make their offerings. The priests must have been exhausted from all the hard work of gutting and dressing and cleaning each animal. The smell would have permeated the camp. Again, all to remind God's people of the monumental effort it took to keep them holy before God.

This should only deepen our appreciation for Christ. Fully God. Fully Man. As God, He is fully able to satisfy the justice of God for all sin for all time. As Man, He is able to truly represent us. Take our place. Become our substitute. In Christ, Act 3 comes to its glorious close! The Father making Him who knew no sin (Christ) to become sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God! (2 Cor. 5:21) Because of what He has done, no more sacrifices are required. No more blood needs to be shed. We ARE made holy just as He is holy! This is the glory of the gospel which the Levitical sacrifices foreshadow.

February 17, 2018
UNAUTHORIZED FIRE

Readings for the day: Leviticus 8, 9, 10

I love this quote from Annie Dillard. "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return." I tend to agree. We are far too often unaware of the sheer and utter holiness of the One we approach Sunday after Sunday. We treat Him far too casually.

Worship for the Israelites was a dangerous proposition. Not because God is capricious or reckless or mentally unstable. But because God is holy. Pure. Dwelling eternally in unapproachable light and glory. His presence is a consuming, purifying fire. It separates gold from dross, wheat from chaff, clean from unclean by its very nature. It's a double-edged sword. Piercing to the deepest recesses of our souls and joints and marrow. Cutting away all that is rotten and septic within us. Every time we invoke His name. Every time we enter His presence. Every time we come before Him in worship, we are literally entering the Most Holy Place. And this is why Dillard challenges us to become more aware of our surroundings. More aware of gulf that exists between an unholy people and a Holy God. More aware of the nature of the One we approach and to take the necessary precautions when we come to worship.

The Israelites knew all this, of course. And yet even they could become far too casual about worship. "Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord has said: 'Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.'" And Aaron held his peace." (Lev. 10:1-3) I cannot imagine watching my children die in worship. I cannot imagine watching them burn to death before the Lord. I cannot imagine the fear and anger and frustration I would feel. But then again, I have not seen God face to face. I've not had to endure His fiery presence. I've not felt the fear the Israelites experienced when they approached God in His sanctuary. Christ, thankfully, saves me from His righteous wrath. Christ, thankfully, turns aside the Father's burning anger and takes it on Himself. Christ, thankfully, satisfies all the demands of God's justice and because of His shed blood, I am made pure. I am made clean. I am made holy. Aaron and his sons had none of these benefits. They had to tread very carefully in the presence of God. They had to perform their duties with devotion and carefully do all God commanded.

We do not understand the nature of sin. We tend to think of sin in rational terms. Errors in judgment. Honest mistakes. Poor choices. Leviticus uses completely different categories. Sin is impure. Unclean. Unholy. It is rotten. Decaying. Festering. Decomposing. Corruption. In order to really grasp the nature of sin, we have to leave the rational behind and think in Biblical terms. The other day, my children took our dog on a walk. Along the way, he found the corpse of a rabbit that had been dead a while. He naturally grabbed it and my kids were disgusted. How many of us have been hiking in the mountains and have come upon the worm-filled, decomposing corpse of some animal and been similarly repulsed? I think of the clean up work we did in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the smell of rot and decay we had to put up with as we gutted homes and cleaned out refrigerators. It was nasty work that made us routinely gag. That's the stench of sin and it's why sacrifices had to be burned continually before the Lord.

How seriously do you take your sin? How seriously do you take your thoughts, attitudes, and actions before the Lord? How seriously do you take your worship? Do you take Christ's sacrifice for granted? Are you, as the Book of Hebrews warns, "sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth?" If so, hear very clearly these sobering words, "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume..." (Heb. 10:26-27) We will never be perfect, of course. But to continue to sin deliberately. To continue to pursue a lifestyle that offends God. To continue to refuse to give God the glory and honor He deserves is to wallow in filth. It's to "trample underfoot the Son of God and profane the blood of the covenant by which He was sanctified and outrage the Spirit of grace." (Heb. 10:29) And this, my friends, is a dangerous thing. Just ask Nadab and Abihu.

February 19, 2018
CLEAN VS. UNCLEAN

Readings for the day: Leviticus 11, 12, 13, 14

First of all, it needs to be said that Leviticus 13:40 brings great comfort. “If a man's hair falls out from his head, he is bald; he is clean.” Ha!

On a more serious note, this is where Leviticus starts to get really challenging. Holy. Unholy. Clean. Unclean. Common. Polluted. Lots of words that we don't think much about in our own context and culture. This begs for some explanation. Scholar Gordon Wenham does a great job describing the distinctions in his commentary.

“Everything that is not holy is common. Common things divide into two groups, the clean and the unclean. Clean things become holy, when they are sanctified. But unclean objects cannot be sanctified. Clean things can be made unclean, if they are polluted. Finally, holy items may be defiled and become common, even polluted, and therefore unclean.... cleanness is a state intermediate between holiness and uncleanness. Cleanness is the normal condition of most things and persons. Sanctification can elevate the clean into the holy, while pollution degrades the clean into the unclean. The unclean and the holy are two states which must never come in contact with each other.” (pp. 19-20)

Why does all this matter? Because God's stated goal for His people is for them to be holy as He is holy. “For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.” (Lev. 11:44-45) Yes, in Christ the ceremonial laws of Leviticus have been fulfilled. We no longer need to worry about clean and unclean animals. (See Peter's vision in Acts 10 as an example.) We no longer need to fear being made unclean by touching lepers or coming into contact with the dead. Through His shed blood, Christ has not only washed us clean (in the Levitical sense) but also sanctified us permanently! This is incredible to think about as we read about the rituals the Israelites had to perform!

At the same time, the call to personal holiness has not been set aside. God still calls His people to be set apart. By thought. Word. Deed. We are called to “be holy as He is holy” and to offer our lives as “living sacrifices” according to Romans 12. The moral law is still in effect. God still has expectations for His people. Sin is still serious and should not be treated casually. This is why Jesus spends a great deal of time talking about the heart in the Sermon on the Mount and Paul spends a great deal of time on the ethical obligations of Christians in most of his letters. As Christians, we no longer need to undergo elaborate rituals to maintain a state of cleanliness or sanctification before the Lord but we should undergo regular examination and confession of our sin in light of the Word of God.

A great practical exercise is what's known as the “Daily Examen.” Pioneered by Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, it is an intentional way to prayerfully reflect on our day, asking God to reveal what drew us closer to Him and what drew us away from Him. We think back on the actions, thoughts, and feelings we experienced during the day and we consciously “examen” them in light of the Word of God. We confess where our actions/thoughts/feelings fell short and we rejoice where our actions/thoughts/feelings reflected Christ. This is just one example of learning how to bring every thought captive to Christ and live for Him.

February 20, 2018
SEXUAL PURITY

Readings for the day: Leviticus 15, 16, 17, 18

Today's reading includes a very important section on sexual purity. These regulations will sound somewhat foreign and somewhat familiar to our ears as they have provided the foundation for the Western legal system for centuries. Incest, bestiality, adultery, and homosexuality are all considered "abominations" before the Lord. Engaging in such activity comes with a heavy price. One would be cut off from his or her people. "Vomited" out of the Promised Land.

We struggle to understand this section of Scripture. Some dismiss it as ceremonial law much like the restrictions on what we can eat or wear. The problem with that approach is that we do affirm such things as bestiality and incest as abhorrent practices even in our time. Some argue these passages are culturally bound. Their argument is that such regulations were designed just for ancient Israel and therefore have no bearing on how we regulate our sexual activity today. Proponents of this argument believe in the primacy of love. As long as two people love one another, to deny them sexual fulfillment is cruel and harsh. Therefore, even adultery is justifiable in most cases as are same-sex relationships. The problem with this approach is that it misunderstands the nature of love. It trades on the erotic almost exclusively and dismisses any notion that sexuality and holiness are inextricably linked. A final argument is made – particularly from our LGBTQ Christian friends - that the authors of Leviticus didn't understand the nature of same-sex attraction and had no experience with loving, committed, monogamous same-sex relationships. Same-sex relationships in the ancient world were always exploitative, oppressive, violent, etc. and therefore the prohibitions in Leviticus 18 do not apply to a 21st century context. The problem with this approach is it is simply not true. Pioneers in Queer Studies like Louis Crompton and New Testament scholars like William Loader (neither of whom are Evangelical Christians and both of whom affirm same-sex relationships) are among many who have demonstrated that loving, non-exploitative, same-sex relationships have existed since antiquity. The Bible is univocal in its condemnation of any sexual expression outside of marriage between a man and a woman to claim otherwise is not being honest. Admittedly, their arguments are more focused on the Apostle Paul's argument in Romans 1 but the roots of Paul's sexual ethic come from Leviticus 18.

So what's the big deal about sex? Is God a prude? Is He simply trying to squash our natural desires and affections? We can't help how we feel, right? The key is to remember the context. You and I are born in sin. Our bodies. Our minds. Our hearts are warped and broken. This includes our sexual desires. We are "naturally" going to want to rebel against God's will. We are "naturally" going to want to pursue unholiness. Our hearts are bent towards evil and corruption and this prevents us from being able to enter into God's presence. And God wants to dwell with us! God wants to be with us! So God commands us to "be holy as He is holy" and this call covers every area of our lives, including our sexuality. Sexuality is not an end in itself. It is a powerful drive created by God for the main purpose of the procreation of our species as well as to give physical expression to the kind of "oneness" God desires men and women to have in this life. The joining together of man and woman in sexual intimacy within the context of the covenant of marriage is literally designed to give us a foretaste of the joy and freedom and transparency we will enjoy with one another in the Kingdom of Heaven. This is why sex is such a powerful drive within us. And it is why God has placed such strong boundaries around its expression. To keep us safe sexually. To keep our sexual lives pure and free from corruption so we can experience all God has for us.

All one has to do is look around our culture today to see the consequences of unfettered sexual desire. Sexually transmitted disease. Sexual abuse and assault. The objectification of the female and male bodies. Rampant divorce and infidelity. The breakdown of families. Depression and anxiety and fear surrounding every potential sexual encounter and/or its aftermath. It's heartbreaking. God's desire is for us to repent and commit ourselves

to holiness. Holy sexuality is expressed in celibacy in singleness and intimacy in marriage between a man and a woman. I realize taking a traditional, Biblical position on sexuality in our world today will draw scorn and even accusations of bigotry. However, I believe when one takes a step back and looks objectively at the empirical data surrounding the consequences of pursuing a sexual ethic divorced from the Bible, one can easily conclude God probably knows better. We would do well to trust Him in this area of our lives and submit our sexuality to His Will as revealed in His Word.

February 21, 2018
THE GOLDEN RULE

Readings for the day: Leviticus 19, 20, 21, 22

Raise your hand if you knew the Golden Rule came from Leviticus? Now repent because you broke the 8th Commandment!:-) Most associate the Golden Rule with Jesus and rightfully so. After all, Jesus repeats it as part of His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. (Matthew 7:12) However, very few people realize that God first enshrined this rule in law in Leviticus. Lost in all the conversation about sacrifices and priestly garments and what one should eat or wear is this beautiful picture of community life in Leviticus 19:9-18.

We see God's heart for the poor and less fortunate..."When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God."

We see God's concern for honesty and transparency..."You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord."

We see God's compassion, especially for the less abled in our midst..."You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord."

We see God's desire for justice and righteousness and truth..."You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the Lord."

And finally, we see God's admonition against hate, anger, rage, contempt, and most of all, vengeance..."You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."

This are massively applicable in our world today! Could you imagine a community of people who sought to put these into practice? On a daily basis? Who gave generously? Dealt honestly? Showed compassion? Fought for truth? Laid aside anger and rage and malice and hate in the name of love? Hopefully you can! It's called the Church! Now I know no church is perfect. After all, it's full of imperfect sinners like me who struggle to keep God's law faithfully. However, as we seek God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, we can expect to see some of these same behaviors break loose in our lives! We can expect to bear this kind of fruit for the Kingdom! And as brothers and sisters called into community together, we can make a HUGE difference in the world today! That's the call! That's the challenge! That was God's plan for Israel and it's still God's plan for His people today!

February 22, 2018
HOLY RHYTHMS

Readings for the day: Leviticus 23, 24, 25

Sabbath. It is a core, foundational principle in Scripture. Hardwired into our system at creation so that we could find rest. One day out of every seven. One year out of every seven. One year out of every fifty set aside for rest. Set aside to honor God. Set aside for not only our rest but that of the land. Animals. Basically, all of creation. A pattern God Himself followed at creation. Six days God labored to make the universe and all that is in it and on the seventh day He rested.

We ignore this command at our peril. Not just because God commands it. This is no arbitrary rule God puts in place to test us. It's not divine busy work just to make sure we are listening. No. God has hardwired the human body for rest. Our best medical professionals will tell you the source of so much of the depression, anxiety, fear, and pain we suffer from is due to the stress of feeling like we have to work 24/7. We are being crushed under the weight of the burdens we carry. The responsibilities. The obligations we've taken on as a family and as individuals in our world. Social media only exacerbates this problem with its never-ending stream of connection. The reality is we were not built to be "on" all the time. 100% productivity is a goal that will kill us if we achieve it.

I remember seeing this play out when I worked as the Manager of Patient Access Services at Boulder Community Hospital. The stated goal of the Human Resources department was to get maximum productivity from each employee. They actually had an equation they followed to determine how much each employee was expected to produce. They kept our available workforce as lean as possible in order to achieve this goal. The result was a much higher number of sick days, lower quality of life in the workplace, and therefore, lower productivity. In their effort to achieve maximum efficiency, they lost sight of the very real human cost.

That was twenty years ago. Things have not gotten better. As a pastor, I watch as people try to squeeze 28 hours worth of work into a 24 hour time period. I see them running from dawn to dark, giving themselves barely any space to breathe. The result is broken marriages. Broken families. Broken lives.

The Sabbath is designed to create a "speed bump" in our lives. To get us to slow down. To rest. To let God be God. It is perhaps the most tangible expression of our faith because it forces us to relinquish control over our lives. When I Sabbath, I am letting God back onto the throne of my life because I am specifically choosing NOT to produce anything. And that's a good thing. Even a godly thing.

A major reason Israel lost the blessing of God was their failure to keep the Sabbath. We actually don't have any evidence they let the land rest every seven years. We certainly have no evidence they honored the Year of Jubilee. When you read the passages from today, it's important to sit back and ponder what life would look like if we really lived according to God's divine rhythm.

February 23, 2018
THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW

Readings for the day: Leviticus 26, 27...Numbers 1, 2

You've just finished Leviticus! Congratulations! Huge props! It's one of the hardest books in all the Bible to get through! But you persevered! You pushed through! Even if you are a little behind, you're going to make it! Well done!

One big question a lot of folks are afraid to ask is this...what is the purpose behind all these laws? Or big picture, what is the purpose behind God's Law? The late, great R.C. Sproul described it this way...

"The first purpose of the law is to be a mirror. On the one hand, the law of God reflects and mirrors the perfect righteousness of God. The law tells us much about who God is. Perhaps more important, the law illumines human sinfulness. Augustine wrote, "The law orders, that we, after attempting to do what is ordered, and so feeling our weakness under the law, may learn to implore the help of grace." The law highlights our weakness so that we might seek the strength found in Christ. Here the law acts as a severe schoolmaster who drives us to Christ.

A second purpose for the law is the restraint of evil. The law, in and of itself, cannot change human hearts. It can, however, serve to protect the righteous from the unjust. Calvin says this purpose is "by means of its fearful denunciations and the consequent dread of punishment, to curb those who, unless forced, have no regard for rectitude and justice." The law allows for a limited measure of justice on this earth, until the last judgment is realized.

The third purpose of the law is to reveal what is pleasing to God. As born-again children of God, the law enlightens us as to what is pleasing to our Father, whom we seek to serve. The Christian delights in the law as God Himself delights in it. Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). This is the highest function of the law, to serve as an instrument for the people of God to give Him honor and glory."

We see these three purposes at work in Leviticus 26. In verses 1-13, God clearly lays out the blessings of obedience. If God's people will live in a way that is pleasing to God, they will bring Him honor and glory. God will dwell with them and walk with them. And they will be blessed. This is the third purpose of the Law. Then, in verses 14-39, God clearly lays out what will happen if God's people don't follow His Law. God Himself will become their adversary. He will fight against them. He will walk contrary to them in wrath and fury. He will punish them. They will suffer. This is the second purpose of the Law which is to restrain evil. Finally, in verses 40-46, we see the first purpose of the law come into play. Repentance. The reality is God's people will not be able to fulfill God's Holy Law and this is by design. It's to teach us that righteousness and holiness are beyond us. It's to bring us to our knees in what I call "holy despair." It's to drive us to the end of ourselves. Our strength. Our ability. Our self-sufficiency. So we get to a place where we cry out to God for mercy and grace! We look to Christ to take our place! We glorify Christ for doing what we could not! We surrender to Christ and exchange His righteousness for our own. It's a beautiful exchange!

So here's the most important question as you finish Leviticus...do you find yourself resenting the Law of God? Dismissing the Law of God? Or do you find yourself overwhelmed by a deep sense of inadequacy before the Lord? If it's the former, I would encourage you to go to prayer and ask God to soften your heart towards Him. If it's the latter, be encouraged that you are drawing ever closer to Christ and He stands ready to take your place!

February 24, 2018
IN GOD'S HANDS

Readings for the day: Numbers 3, 4, 5

The title for this particular book of the Bible could not be more appropriate. The Book of Numbers is all about the numbers! The number of warriors in Israel. The layout of the camp of Israel. The duties of the Levites. Even more specifically, the duties of Kohathites, Gershonites, and Merarites. And then some more regulations regarding ritual purity, confession and repentance, and then this strange test for adultery. As was the case in Leviticus, we have to take a step back and look at the big picture.

"Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel. The Levites shall be mine, for all the firstborn are mine. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both of man and of beast. They shall be mine: I am the Lord." (Num. 3:12-13)

Israel belonged to God. They were His chosen possession out of all the nations of the earth. He had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt and thereby laid claim to their very lives. They were not their own. They were not "free" to choose or not choose God. He had chosen them. He had saved them. He had rescued them. He had made His covenant with them. No matter where they went or what they did or how they acted, they remained His children forever. In order to remind them of this great and awesome truth, God told Moses to set aside one entire tribe...the Levites. They would not be counted in the census. They would not be considered "part" of Israel. They would have no inheritance in the Promised Land. Their "inheritance" would be God Himself. They would be set aside to serve Him in His Tabernacle and, later, His Temple. They would play specific roles within the worshiping life of Israel. They would guard the sanctuary. They would set it up, tear it down, and transport it day after day. From birth they were set apart, consecrated to the Lord's service. It was not a vocation they chose but a calling God had placed on their lives.

Fast forward a few thousand years. One greater than Moses is born. A high priest greater than Aaron has come. The Old Covenant is fulfilled. The New Covenant is established. "In speaking of a new covenant, Jesus makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away." (Hebrews 8:13) The reality is the Old Covenant was always temporal. Always bound to a particular cultural situation. Always designed to point us to a new and better covenant which Jesus Himself would die and rise to guarantee. "This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant." (Hebrews 7:22) The ceremonial laws of Israel were culturally bound to a particular time and place. To a particular situation in history. Even the moral law which remains binding only serves to show us our weakness and imperfections. Therefore, it is useless to save. "For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God." (Hebrews 7:18-19) Jesus is that better hope! And through His life, death, and resurrection, God once again lays claim to our lives. He chooses us. He redeems us. He purchases us with His own blood. And because He Himself is the eternal high priest, interceding for us continually in the heavens. And because He Himself is the eternal sacrifice, fully atoning for the full weight of all our sin. "He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him..." (Hebrews 7:25)

In Christ, we belong to God. We are His treasured possession. His chosen people. As such, we are not our own. Our lives are not our own. Our future is not our own. All that we have and all that we are and all that we achieve is not ours to hold onto but rather ours to offer in service to God. How different would life be if we understood this great truth? How different would life be if we understood every minute of our day...every dollar we make...every interaction we have is in God's hands?

February 26, 2018
WAITING ON GOD

Readings for the day: Numbers 6, 7, 8, 9

One of the hardest things to learn as a follower of Christ is how to wait. We are always in such a hurry. We rush around in the morning to get off to work and school. We rush around all day at work trying to get things done. We rush around in the evenings to different activities and events. Then we wake up the next day to do it all over again. Furthermore, we live in a world of instant gratification. We get what we want when we want it and woe to anyone who cannot deliver on our timeline! Patience is no longer a virtue in our world. Waiting is considered a waste of time.

The Bible is clear that “waiting” is a key skill for any disciple. Patience is a fruit of the Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives. Long-suffering is something God’s people know intimately. Consider what we read from Numbers today. “On the day that the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony. And at evening it was over the tabernacle like the appearance of fire until morning. So it was always: the cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night. And whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, after that the people of Israel set out, and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the people of Israel camped...At the command of the Lord they camped, and at the command of the Lord they set out. They kept the charge of the Lord, at the command of the Lord by Moses.” (Num. 9:15-17, 23) The passage tells us that sometimes they camped for days in one location. Sometimes for hours. The point is Israel didn’t move until God moved. Israel didn’t break camp until God broke camp. Israel was learning how to wait on God.

I’ve been in ministry now for almost twenty years. Over that time, I’ve spent hundreds if not thousands of hours in my office counseling people through all sorts of different seasons in their lives. One of the most common issues I have to address is impatience. It makes total sense. People in crisis want out of crisis as soon as possible! So I get it. However, in their rush to get out of crisis they often jump from the frying pan into the fire. Refusing to wait on God, they prematurely end their marriage. Prematurely cut off a relationship. Prematurely make a professional decision. Prematurely rush into what they think is a solution only to find their supposed “cure” worse than their disease.

God wants us to wait on Him. His time is not our time. His ways are not our ways. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. So often when we wait on God, we don’t understand. I am sure there were moments when Israel looked around and said, “Really God? This is where you want us to camp? This is where you want us to settle down for a few days?” I’m sure there were other times when they found wonderful pasture and plentiful water only to have the pillar of cloud rise the next morning, taking them onward. They had never seen the Promised Land. They had no idea where they were headed or what it would look like when they got there. They simply had to trust God. They had to wait on God. They had to look to God.

Where is God calling you to trust Him in your life today? Is it with a professional decision? Is it with your children’s future? Your marriage? Is it with your finances? Or perhaps your aging parent’s health? Maybe it’s your college choice? Or a career decision after you graduate? What does that look like for you and how are you learning to wait on God to reveal His will?

February 27, 2018

REAL LIFE

Readings for the day: Numbers 10, 11, 12, 13 and Psalm 90

There seems to be this yearning in the human heart for deep connection. To God. To other human beings. There is a real craving in the world today for authenticity. A desire to "be real" and be known. I hear it all the time and I feel it down in my bones as well. The problem, of course, is most folks don't really want to engage on an authentic level because it's not very pretty when we do! We run into all kinds of warts and sin and ugliness and we're not very good at accepting each other's faults. We aren't very good at showing each other grace. We aren't very good at forgiveness and reconciliation because such things take a lot of work. So we settle. We settle for less in our human relationships. We settle for not being known. Not being understood. Not being connected. And worst of all, we settle in our relationship with God. We only let Him in so far. We only let Him reign and rule over parts of our lives, not the whole. We only submit halfway and the result is a lot of pain and suffering and heartache.

Nothing's new under the sun. The people of God have been struggling with these things for thousands of years. It's like the struggle is hardwired into our system by the Fall. (Remember that tragic event in Genesis 3? It frames everything!) You think about the blessings Israel enjoyed. A literal pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day. God visibly present among them! God's Shekinah glory filling the Tabernacle. Moses literally speaking to God on their behalf. Silver trumpets blowing every time they went forth to remind them God would be with them. The parting of the Red Sea. The deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Rescue from the plagues. Manna in the wilderness. The miracles they experienced were incredible! And still they complained! Still they struggled to believe! Still they rebelled!

"And the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, and when the Lord heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp." (Num. 11:1)

"Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, "Oh that we had meat to eat!" (Num. 11:4)

"Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. And they said, "Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the Lord heard it." (Num. 12:1-2)

"And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them." (Num. 13:33)

Leading God's people has never been easy! Or any group of people for that matter! There is always complaining. Always whining. Always criticism. But guess what! That's real! That's authentic! That's people being themselves! And if we're honest, none of us are immune! Even Moses complains, "I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me." (Num. 11:14)

So what's the answer? Humility. One of my favorite verses in all of Scripture is Numbers 12:3, "Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth." What a statement! Moses' leadership was not based on his power or eloquence or influence or wealth or talent. It was based primarily on his humility. His meekness. And because Moses considered others more important than himself, he wasn't threatened God put His Spirit on other leaders. He wasn't threatened when God's Spirit showed up in other parts of the camp. He wasn't crushed by the betrayal of Aaron and Miriam. He remained faithful.

Humility gives us the ability to accept other people for who they are...warts and all. It gives us the ability to extend grace even in difficult circumstances. It gives us the ability to address the log in our own eye first before we go to pluck the dust out of our brother or sister's eyes. Most importantly, it is humility that allows us to submit our lives to the Lord and to follow in His ways.

February 28, 2018
GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

Readings for the day: Numbers 14, 15, 16 and Psalm 95

Today's passage reveals two things in stark terms. If God were not faithful. If His steadfast love did not endure forever. If His grace was not extended to generation after generation. We would be dead. We would be destroyed. Our sin is simply too much. Our penchant for rebellion too hard to resist. Our pride too much to overcome.

The people of God quake in fear at the report of the spies. They mutiny against Moses and the Lord. They make plans to head back to Egypt. Back to slavery. Back to what was familiar. It reminds me of one of my favorite Proverbs, "Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly." (26:11) But for the intervention of the Lord, they would have stoned Moses to death! Incredible! So God tells Moses to step aside so He can destroy them and start all over yet again. Once again, Moses is being tested. Once again, Moses is being challenged to stand in the gap for God's people. Once again, Moses intercedes. He calls on God to remember His own name. To be true to His character. To forgive as He has promised which is what God does.

At the same time, God has a mission. Come hell or high water, God will make His glory known on the earth! God will fill the earth with His glory no matter what! No obstacle will stand in His way. No power will prevent Him from accomplishing this great task! Not sin. Not evil. Not death. "But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord," (Num. 14:21) It's an incredible statement! One that drives God even to this day! One you and I exist to fulfill! God's plan is for God's people who are made in God's image to multiply and fill the earth! This is the "Great Commission" given to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the people of Israel. Jesus renews this Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel when He sends His disciples out into all the world to make other disciples!

This is God's great mission and the greatest obstacle standing in its way is...us! You and me! God's people! Korah rebels. Dathan and Abiram rebel. The people of God blame Moses and Aaron for their deaths. So once again, God has to step in. He must discipline His people. He must teach them to obey. So He sends plagues. He opens the earth. He reminds them of the law. He allows them to be defeated in battle. He makes them wander in the wilderness until an entire generation passes away. God is faithful. God is steadfast. God is holy. God will not be mocked. God will not allow His people to derail His mission.

So think about your own life? Where are you living in willful disobedience? Where are you living in stubborn rebellion? What sins are you clinging to, refusing to let go? Is it pride? Is it anger? Is it disappointment? Is it fear? Where are you personally getting in the way of God's mission to fill the world with His glory?