

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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2018

STUDY AND COMMENTARY

BY

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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MARCH

March 1, 2018 BLAME SHIFT

Readings for the day: Numbers 17, 18, 19, 20

March 2, 2018 THE DONKEY THAT SPOKE

Readings for the day: Numbers 21, 22, 23, 24

March 3, 2018 ZEAL FOR GOD'S GLORY

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

March 5, 2018 HONEST QUESTIONS

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

March 6, 2018 DEATH PENALTY

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

March 7, 2018 MOSES' LAST WORDS

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 1, 2, 3

March 8, 2018 THE SHEMA

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 4, 5, 6, 7

March 9, 2018 SPIRITUAL ALZHEIMER'S

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 8, 9, 10, 11

March 10, 2018 THE END OF POVERTY

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 12, 13, 14, 15

March 12, 2018 THE DIVINE POWER OF GOD'S WORD

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 16, 17, 18, 19

March 13, 2018 CHRIST BECAME THE CURSE

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 20, 21, 22, 23

March 14, 2018 FIRST FRUITS

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 24, 25, 26, 27

March 15, 2018 BLESSINGS AND CURSES

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 28, 29, 30

March 16, 2018 THE SONG OF MOSES

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 31, 32, 33, 34

March 17, 2018 HARD QUESTIONS

Readings for the day: Joshua 1, 2 and Psalm 105

March 19, 2018 STONE ALTARS

Readings for the day: Joshua 3, 4, 5, 6

March 20, 2018 JIHAD IN THE BIBLE?

Readings for the day: Joshua 7, 8, 9, 10

March 21, 2018 PERSPECTIVE

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

March 22, 2018 STARTING VS. FINISHING

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

March 23, 2018 WITNESS

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

March 24, 2018 WHO'S YOUR SPIRITUAL HERO?

Readings for the day: Joshua 23, 24, and Judges 1

March 26, 2018 LIFE IS STRUGGLE

Readings for the day: Judges 2, 3, 4, 5

March 27, 2018 HUMILITY

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

March 28, 2018 JEPHTHAH'S SACRIFICE

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

March 29, 2018 WHEN HEROES FALL

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

March 30, 2018 HEART OF DARKNESS

Readings for the day: Judges 19, 20, 21

March 31, 2018 REDEEMER

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

March 1, 2018
BLAME SHIFT

Readings for the day: Numbers 17, 18, 19, 20

As a pastor, I do a lot of counseling. One of the most common issues I face is something called “blame shifting.” Basically, a person commits a wrong and when confronted on it, “shifts” the blame to someone else. This can be their spouse. Their children. Their parents. Even their pastor!-) I cannot tell you the number of times I have counseled a couple on their marriage only to have them blame me for their eventual separation and divorce. Never mind the fact they were unwilling to put in the work. Unwilling to do the homework I assigned. Unwilling to change any of their unhealthy behaviors. Unwilling to engage each other at a different level. At the end of the day, because the counseling didn’t “work”, it must be my failure as a pastor.

We see this same dynamic in play in Moses’ relationship with Israel. How many times do they accuse Moses of failing to lead them well? How many times do they blame him for not providing water, food, or getting them to the Promised Land? Never mind their own sin. Their own lack of faith. Their own fear. Their worship of false gods. “And the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord! Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink.” (Num. 20:3-5) Over and over again, we hear this refrain. Let’s go back to Egypt. Let’s go back to slavery. You brought us out here to die. You brought us out here to suffer. It would be truly baffling if I didn’t see it everyday.

Jesus addresses “blame-shifting” in the Sermon on the Mount. “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.” (Matt. 7:3-5) Essentially, we have to be humble enough to acknowledge our own fears and failures and struggles and sin before we dare to confront someone else on their issues. We have to be willing to look ourselves in the mirror and honestly confront our own faults before we point out to others where they fall short. In my experience, there is plenty of blame to go around in just about every broken relationship. It’s always a two-way street.

We live in a highly critical world. A quick glance through Twitter or Facebook reveals how quick we are to blame others. We blame the system. We blame the government. We blame the church. We blame liberals. We blame conservatives. We blame Republicans. We blame Democrats. We blame our leaders. We blame teachers. We blame coaches. We blame absentee fathers. It’s like “blame-shifting” has become the national pastime. What you don’t see is anyone taking responsibility for why they find themselves in the position they’re in. You rarely find anyone acknowledging the ways they failed and how that contributed to their pain and suffering and heartache. No, it’s always someone else’s fault which makes us the “victim.” And there is great power in our culture today in casting ourselves as “victims” for it means we don’t have to take responsibility for our actions. We set ourselves beyond accountability. No one then gets to confront us and we are safe. Or so we think. The sad reality is when we avoid confrontation, accountability and responsibility; we never grow. And because we never grow, we tend to experience only more loneliness, pain, and heartache. It’s a vicious cycle.

So where do you find yourself today? Are you the kind of person who takes responsibility for your failures? Is confessional prayer a regular part of your life? Do you find it easy to apologize and ask for forgiveness? When confronted, do you listen and receive what the other person is saying? Or do you get defensive? Do you blame shift? Do you take their criticism personally? In Christ, we are set free from the need to be perfect. In Christ, we are set free from the need to perform. In Christ, we have nothing to fear and no need to blame. In Christ, we can accept the reality that we are sinners in desperate need of grace.

March 2, 2018
THE DONKEY THAT SPOKE

Readings for the day: Numbers 21, 22, 23, 24

When I first became a Christian, I started eating at this little pit BBQ place off Arapahoe in Boulder. It was owned and operated by an amazing man named Bruce. Bruce was the son of the famous "Daddy Bruce" who served the homeless of Denver for so many years, making sure they got a full Thanksgiving dinner. Bruce Jr. was cut from the same cloth as his father. He not only served the homeless of Boulder well, he also was a strong believer in Jesus Christ. I don't know that I've ever met someone quite like him. He literally could quote you chapter and verse from the whole Bible. He would quiz me every time I came in before he would make me any food. He would tell the best stories about how God had worked in his life. One day, he was sharing with me his frustrations with how biblically illiterate Christians tend to be. He was a black Baptist preacher and could preach with the best of them. I still remember the crescendo of his sermon that day..."Doug, when I'm in need don't you give me Footprints in the Sand! I don't need no Prayer of Serenity! Tell me about the donkey that spoke! Now that's in the Bible!" I still chuckle to this day every time I think of it!

Today we read a crazy story about a fortune-teller named Balaam and his donkey. Israel is moving towards the Promised Land. God is going to fulfill His promise to Abraham. But it won't be easy. The land is already occupied. There are forces arrayed against them along the way. Nations and tribes and cities whom they will have to fight in order to claim this promise as their own. Arad. Amorites. Bashan. All fall before Israel. All are put to the sword. Devoted to destruction. And now it's Moab's turn. (If you remember, the Moabites are descendants from Lot who was Abraham's nephew. His oldest daughter got him drunk and slept with him in order to get pregnant. So these are distant cousins of Israel.) One can almost imagine living in those days. Getting word of a new superpower rising from slavery. Defeating the Egyptians. Overrunning all who oppose them. Fear and trembling seize the Moabites. So Balak, their king, sends for Balaam. His hope is that Balaam will use his magic to put a curse on Israel, thus weakening them so they can be defeated. But Balaam is visited by God. God commands Balaam not to go with the princes of Moab. However, Balaam eventually relents before the pressure and promises Balak brings to bear. So he mounts his donkey and begins his journey. It's not long before the donkey freezes in its tracks. It can see the angel of the Lord blocking their path. Balaam, in his blindness both physically and spiritually, is unaware. God opens the mouth of the donkey (insert your favorite Shrek scene) and speaks to Balaam. The net result of all this is that Balaam will indeed go to Balak but will only speak blessings over Israel.

So what are we to make of all this? Magic? Fortune-telling? Donkeys that speak? The point here is that God uses all things to accomplish His purposes. Even our superstitions. Remember when Jacob peeled poplar and almond trees in order to breed a specific kind of goat and sheep in Genesis? Does anyone actually believe the power was in the trees? Or was it God using even Jacob's foolishness to accomplish His purposes? Or what about the bronze serpent on the pole? Is it really the talisman that saved Israel from the poisonous snakes that were killing them? Or was it God using even their delusions to deliver them? Think about the fallacies we live with today. The "invisible hand" of Adam Smith from his famous book, *Wealth of Nations*. The myth of universal human rights in a world where every tribe or nation seems to place a different value on human life. The notion that democracy is trans-cultural and can be universally applied in the way we apply it here in America. (A mistake that is costing us dearly in Afghanistan and Iraq...) The reality is we too believe in magic. We too believe in myths. They may be couched in more sophisticated language and political or economic theory but they are fairy tales nonetheless.

So what's a Christian to do? We have to push past our superstitions and look to God. We have to push past the "bronze serpents" we create and stop looking to "fortune-tellers" to show us the way. We have to dig deep into God's Word. We must fix our eyes on Jesus! See Him lifted high on the cross! Paying for our sin! Showing us the way home! Showing us how to live a life with and for God! He is our only hope! He is greater than any bronze serpent! He is wiser than any Balaam! He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life!

March 3, 2018
ZEAL FOR GOD'S GLORY

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

Baal is the Canaanite fertility god. Worshiped by the tribes occupying the Promised Land, he will continue to entice the people of Israel to abandon the true worship of the Living God. The Moabites and the Midianites (nomadic tribesman who wandered frequently much like the Bedouin's today) worshiped Baal through sex and gluttony. They would hold massive parties where they would eat and drink to excess. In the midst of the drunkenness, they would engage in all kinds of sexual activity. All in an effort to show Baal how faithful they were to him so he would make their crops grow and their flocks multiply and open the wombs of all the women so they would bear children. So when Numbers 25 talks about the people of Israel "whoring" with the daughters of Moab, it is speaking literally. They were engaging in the worship practices of Baal and this was an abomination before the Lord. One of them even took it as far as bringing a Midianite woman before the Tabernacle and having sex with her in front of Moses and the whole congregation. It was a brazen act of defiance against God.

If we don't learn anything else from this passage, we must understand how serious God is about worship. Not just what we do on Sunday mornings for an hour but the worship we give Him every single day. God demands our single-minded devotion. God will not tolerate us worshiping other gods. God will not allow our love to be divided. It's black or white. You either love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength or you don't. There really is no gray area. This doesn't mean we will be perfect and God, in His graciousness, provides for our weaknesses. But the trajectory of our hearts must be set. God must be our North Star! God must be the sole object of our devotion! God alone is worthy to be praised!

It is critical to think about this passage in context of what we read yesterday. Balaam was paid by the king of Moab to curse Israel. Several times, he makes the attempt only to have God intervene. God will not allow Israel's enemies to curse her. He will protect and guard His people. But what about when Israel curses herself? What about when she brings judgment down on herself for her actions? What Balaam could not do, Israel did to herself by worshiping Baal at Peor and this incident becomes almost proverbial in the national life of Israel. It will show up again and again throughout the Old Testament. Deuteronomy, Joshua, Psalms, and Hosea all refer back to this moment in time when Israel broke the first commandment and abandoned her God.

We aren't so different, are we? Over and over again, God protects us. Provides for us. Guards us and keeps us. He rescues us from the curse of sin. He breaks the power of the devil. He overthrows death itself. But then we chase after other gods. We pursue success. We pursue wealth. We pursue comfort. We pursue safety. We make idols out of our children. Out of our health. Out of our professional careers. We even bring these idols with us to worship and ask God's blessing upon them! (I think of the picture that went viral this week of the religious cult in Pennsylvania asking God's blessing on their AR-15's! Crazy!!)

Unfortunately, we do it all the time. I cannot tell you the number of people I have married over the years who engaged in premarital sex but then wanted God's blessing on their relationship. I cannot tell you the number of people over the years who shared with me God told them to get divorced. I cannot tell you the number of people who told me they felt God blessed their adultery. It's like we're still worshiping the Baal of Peor! Friends, God will not be mocked! God will not tolerate our sin! We cannot pretend there won't be consequences for our rebellion! It may not be Phineas with his spear but it could be much, much worse! "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" (Matt. 7:21-23)

What sin are you indulging in your life right now? What thoughts do you entertain? What feelings are you holding onto? What activities are you engaging in that will bring down God's judgment? A man by the name of H. Richard Niebuhr once argued that too many Christians want to believe in a "God without wrath bringing men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross." If you have fallen for this lie, you need to repent. If words like "judgment", "sin", "wrath", etc. have fallen out of your vocabulary, you are in danger of missing out on the heart of the gospel. Yes, God is love. But because God is love, He hates our sin. Because God is love, He sent His Son to die. Because God is love, He bore the wrath we deserved. Paid the price we owed. Satisfied the judgment we earned. God's love is not some warm fuzzy. It is fierce. Jealous. Loyal. Steadfast. True. And it will not tolerate any rivals.

March 5, 2018
HONEST QUESTIONS

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

It is important to read the Bible honestly. Eyes wide open. Not shying away from the difficult texts. Today's readings are hard. They raise hard questions. They raise hard issues. They force us to grapple with our understanding of God and Israel and history. Thankfully, I have many friends who aren't afraid to ask these questions and one, in particular, asked the following...

"Israel's warriors slaughter thousands in battle, including women and children, and this pleases God? "

"I would expect 2 million people to have left some sort of footprint over the course of 40 or so years of wandering." Where's the archaeological evidence?

"Anyone else wonder about all the animals sacrificed?" The number had to run into the millions!

These are fantastic questions and the logistics of the Exodus has presented a puzzle to scholars for centuries. A few things to help you along as you read...

First, Numbers was not written as a math textbook anymore than Genesis was written as a science textbook. Israel often reported their "numbers" collectively rather than individually and sometimes spoke hyperbolically to make a deeper point. For example, Numbers 11 talks about God giving quail to Israel to eat after they complained about the manna. One skeptic, doing the math, suggests God would have had to send 29 trillion quail if we take the calculations literally. Obviously, this is a misreading and the careful reader is able to make room for hyperbole without losing sight of the larger point. The Torah is not a system of equations to solve which is why Biblical numerology is junk science.

Having said that, it doesn't mean every detail of these stories should be taken allegorically or metaphorically. They did actually take place. There is real truth here that needs to be teased out. So, Israel's battles. Yes, they were bloody affairs. Yes, Israel slaughtered entire cities and put entire populations to death. "Devoting cities to destruction" was an act of divine judgment with Israel serving as God's instrument of holy justice. The nations Israel defeated and destroyed were evil by any definition. Filled with horrific practices like child sacrifice, sexual perversity, idol worship, economic exploitation, etc. The reality is these pagan nations earned their fate through their depravity. One can question the "fairness" of this approach since Israel engaged in some of these same practices but one also has to remember that what's "fair" is God rightfully destroying the human race for its sin. Israel was only spared as an act of grace.

Israel's desert wanderings. Much archaeological research has been done in this area with little to show for it. (Of course, I read a recent account of a contemporary archaeologist doing work in Sinai on the 1973 Yom Kippur war who found an Israelite Jeep under 52 feet of sand! So you can imagine how deep the evidence for the Exodus might be buried after thousands of years!) The reality is very little physical evidence has been found except for a couple of Egyptian records and a spontaneous explosion of Canaanite settlements around 1200BC. (Right about the time we would expect them to appear according to Scripture.) This begs the question of the route Israel took. Several different ones have been proposed. Furthermore, there are no graves. No pottery. No "footprint" as the question above suggests. Of course, this isn't unique to Israel. The Scythians who lived in the Russian steppes from 1000BC to the medieval era also left little trace. They too were a nomadic people. The reality is much of it is probably still to be found buried deep in the sand.

Israel's sacrifices. Without a doubt, life in ancient Israel was a virtual slaughterhouse. Practiced literally, the priests would be sacrificing millions of animals every single year. Here again the principle of representation applies as it is entirely possible one man's sacrifice would "represent" an entire family, clan, or tribe. Furthermore, considerable latitude was given in ancient near east cultures when it came to the practical

application of the law. At the same time, the sacrificial fires were kept burning day and night. By the time we get to the Temple in Jerusalem, the Talmud depicts priests wading knee deep in blood. It describes in some passages up to 1.2 million animals being slaughtered in a single day, something the Roman historian Josephus confirms. Archaeological evidence from dumps outside the city seem to confirm these findings as well. The reality is the sacrificial system of Israel created an enormous economic system that had to be supported by trade, animal husbandry, etc.

Obviously, there's a lot more that we could say about each of these topics but here's the big point. The Bible continues to bear up under the closest scrutiny possible. There is no ancient book more studied, more dissected, more questioned, more challenged than the Bible. And yet it continues to stand the test of time. If we resist the temptation to turn it into a textbook and read thoughtfully, we find the overall narrative is confirmed over and over again. In fact, in 2009 archaeologists found a 2,700 year old seal with name "Isaiah" on it near another seal bearing the impression of King Hezekiah. This is quite possibly the first physical evidence we have of the Old Testament Prophet Isaiah! Incredible!

March 6, 2018
DEATH PENALTY

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

I worked for two years at New Jersey State Prison as a volunteer chaplain. NJSP is where the state of New Jersey sends the worst of the worst. Murderers. Violent criminals. Sex offenders. Gang leaders. Mafia dons. It is also where they used to house death row. I never was allowed into death row itself but I remember standing outside the door, looking in. It was a sterile environment and the men housed there were cut off from the general population. New Jersey abolished the death penalty in 2007, five years after I left. But from 1690 to 1963, they executed 361 people.

The death penalty is a thorny subject for Christians. In theory, it does have biblical support drawn mainly from passages like we read today in Numbers 35. A careful reading of the passage reveals many fascinating details. Cities of refuge. Premeditated murder vs. accidental death. Avengers of blood. Congregational trials. Evidence. Witnesses. Motives. Methods. It's a very specific passage that actually places limits on vengeance in a way that would have been striking to other ancient near east cultures. It employs the principle of lex talionis or "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Proportional justice. It keeps vendettas from forming between families and clans that last generations.

Those who support the contemporary use of the death penalty on biblical grounds need to wrestle with the boundaries this passage sets. Provision must be made for the safety of the murderer while he/she awaits trial. Motive must be carefully discerned and the accuser is the one to carry out the sentence. If there was no premeditation, then the congregation is allowed to judge and show mercy by assigning the person to a city of refuge for a certain duration. (Lifetime of the current high priest.) There must be more than one witness to the crime. And you cannot tolerate murder in the land lest it become ritually polluted.

Obviously, it's quite the challenge to apply ancient near east law codes in a 21st century context. Layer in the obvious problems we have in our legal system with racial and economic injustice (statistically ethnic minorities and the poor are FAR more likely to be convicted in our culture), as well as the frequency with which our justice system convicts the wrong person (DNA evidence has been a game-changer here) and one can see why many would argue we should abolish the death penalty altogether. Furthermore, what are we to do with Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount? "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." (Matt. 5:21-22) Clearly, Jesus is accusing all of us of being guilty of murder in our hearts!

So what do we do? We must carefully and prayerfully consider our position on the death penalty. We must ask if it is just...not as an abstract concept but as a concrete practice. We must make sure our practices are just and if there is a hint of incompetence or injustice in the way we prosecute then we must forbear. Furthermore, we have to come to grips with the gravity of our actions. Executing another human being is deeply significant. The shedding of blood is not something to take lightly. Unjust killing pollutes the land in which we dwell. Furthermore, to take the life of another human being before they accept Christ as Lord and Savior consigns them to an eternity in hell. All these factors must weigh heavily on us as we wrestle with this issue in our society.

March 7, 2018
MOSES' LAST WORDS

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 1, 2, 3

You finished Numbers! Great job! Another book down! Some would say you've just made it through one of the toughest stretches of the Bible. Pat yourself on the back as we dig into Deuteronomy.

The Book of Deuteronomy is a sermon. In fact, it is Moses' final sermon to God's people. His last will and testament as it were. His final chance to encourage. Challenge. Confront. Comfort. He's now led Israel for decades. And he was no spring chicken when he got started! He's led them out of Egypt. Led them through the wilderness. Led them through the ups and downs of the wilderness journey. He has personally witnessed the miracles of God. Delivered the Ten Commandments. Issued the Law. Under the mighty hand of God, he has created a system of worship, governance, economics, and military organization that will long outlast him. It is a remarkable accomplishment.

Now he's at the end of his life. He's not going over the Jordan. He will not set foot in the Promised Land. What would you say in Moses' position? Given one last chance to address God's people, what would be on your heart and mind? What would you want them to know moving forward? What lessons would you hope they learned?

One of my favorite speeches of all time was delivered April 3, 1968 by Martin Luther King Jr. on the eve of his assassination. He sounds a lot like Moses in my mind. "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like any man, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." I think at the end of the day Moses, like King, was happy. He knew he couldn't go over to the Promised Land but he died knowing his great work was finished. He had witnessed the salvation of God's people. He had seen the glory of the Lord.

When you finish your life, how will you feel? When you look back at all you've experienced. All you've accomplished. All you set out to do. When you think about your family. Your children. Your grandchildren. What will you want them to know about you? Say about you? Remember about you? Will it have anything to do with your faith in Christ?

March 8, 2018
THE SHEMA

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 4, 5, 6, 7

Deuteronomy 6:4 contains the single most important prayer in all of Israel. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." It is the prayer known as the "Shema" (pronounced Sh'ma). Jews are required to recite this prayer twice a day. It is the first prayer they teach their children. It is the last prayer they pray before they die. It captures the essence of their monotheistic faith. Praying this prayer twice a day reminds the Jewish people of the personal relationship they have with God and His Kingdom. They are His chosen people. They are His royal priesthood. They are His holy nation. Set apart by God Himself to declare His glory to the nations of the earth. To fulfill the great promise once made to Abraham. "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations," (Deut. 7:6-9)

Because God has chosen them. Because God has set His love on them. Because God has delivered them from bondage and slavery in Egypt. Israel is to return His love. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." (Deut. 6:5) This is the second part of the Shema. The commitment of the believer to honor God in every facet of their lives. We are to love God with all our heart. All our affections. All our feelings. He must love Him first above all other things. All other people. All of our accomplishments, dreams, and visions. We must love Him with our souls. From the depths of our beings. From the deepest recesses of who we are. To love God with our "soul" is to literally love Him from our bowels. From our gut. From a place deeper than our minds. Deeper than our hearts. The very core of our beings. We must love God with all our might. All our physical strength and activity should be dedicated to the glory of God. All our work. All our play. All our relationships. All our physical labor. All of it is to bring glory to God. This is what the Apostle Paul is referring to in Colossians 3:17, "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

There is a lot packed into today's reading. So many reminders of God's great faithfulness to His people. Despite their sin. Despite their grumbling. Despite their complaining. God remains steadfast. This is the essence of the covenant of grace God has made with His people. Fast forward a few thousand years to Jesus. A lawyer challenges him one day to identify the greatest of the commandments. Jesus goes right back to the Shema. "And Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matt. 22:37-40) Not only did Jesus place the Shema at the center of His life but He demands His followers do the same.

How are you seeking to love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength? What does that practically look for you in your life? If you do not know, let me challenge you to memorize Matthew 22:37 and ask God to give you the wisdom to know how to place the Shema at the center of your life like Jesus.

March 9, 2018

SPIRITUAL ALZHEIMER'S

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 8, 9, 10, 11

"Remember." "Lest you forget." "Do not forget." The Book of Deuteronomy is filled with references to memory. Filled with warnings about forgetting the mighty works of God. Filled with encouragement to never losing sight of the faithfulness of God. Moses is keenly aware of a condition we all suffer from...spiritual alzheimer's.

My family has a history of Alzheimer's. It hit my paternal grandfather in his late thirties. It hit my paternal grandmother in her seventies. It hit my aunt in her late fifties. It hit my maternal grandmother in her eighties. And I expect it will hit me at some point in time. Alzheimer's is a terrible disease. It robs one of their most precious memories. As our memories fade, our personalities change. We say things we wouldn't normally say. We do things we wouldn't normally do. We almost become different people. My paternal grandmother was one of the most outgoing and energetic people I have ever known. She was bold. Courageous. Didn't care about social convention. She was eccentric and weird in a funny, unique way that made her beloved to those who knew her. When she lost her memory, she became withdrawn. Fearful. Scared. Insecure. I would visit her often in the care facility where she was staying and it was incredibly hard to watch her decline. Or I think about my maternal grandmother. She was beautiful. Dignified. Brilliant. She could play Bach and Beethoven by ear. When she lost her memory, she eventually declined into a catatonic state that was heartbreaking.

We all suffer from this disease on some level. It is so easy for us to forget all God has done. Despite all the miracles. Despite God's provision in the wilderness. Despite God's protection and deliverance and the many ways He declared His love for His people...Moses knew Israel would forget. He knew they would get into the Promised Land and begin to prosper. They would build homes and plant vineyards. They would harvest crops and raise their herds. They would conquer cities and lay claim to the territory once promised to Abraham. And in the midst of all this success, they would forget God. "Take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end. Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.'" (Deut. 8:11-17)

We have to work hard to remember. We have to incorporate spiritual rhythms into our daily lives so we do not forget. By reading God's Word and humbling ourselves before Him in prayer and participating in corporate worship every week, we remind ourselves of the most important truth of our lives...we are not our own! We are not our own! It is God who gives us the power to get wealth. (8:18) It is God who gives us victory over our enemies. (9:1-3) It is God alone who is righteous. It is God alone who is holy. To God belongs the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. And the only reason we are not destroyed along with the rest of the nations is because God made a decision in eternity to love us and set us apart for Himself. "Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day." (Deut. 10:15)

This is why we walk in the ways of the Lord. This is why we keep His commandments. By following the Law of God, we are constantly reminded of His great goodness towards us. Reminded of His great love for us. Reminded of His great faithfulness. God demands our obedience not because He needs it. Not because He's controlling or manipulative or demanding or insecure. God demands our obedience because He wants to preserve in our hearts our memory of Him. "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good." (Deut. 10:12-13)

March 10, 2018
THE END OF POVERTY

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 12, 13, 14, 15

Today's reading begins with a strong admonition to keep the First Commandment and what will happen should Israel stray. It is a strong, convicting reminder of how seriously God takes worship and the consequences are pretty self-evident. This summary verse is a good one with echoes of not only the Shema but also the Jesus' words on the greatest commandment. "You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him." (Deut. 13:4)

What I found more fascinating was this glimpse into how Israel was to handle poverty as a nation. Poverty is a very real issue in our world today. Despite major advances in the global war on poverty – and the progress truly has been miraculous as over 1 billion people have been lifted out of extreme poverty since 1990 – the struggle remains. Furthermore, this issue is complicated by how we define "poverty." There are some objective measures defined by the World Bank and others. Extreme poverty is defined as living on less than \$1.90/day. Moderate poverty is less than \$3.10/day. But then there is this idea of "relative poverty" which measures the economic distance of an individual from a certain percentage of the median household income in a particular community. Our response to the problem of poverty will depend to some extent on which definition we are working from and this, in turn, will shape how we approach our interpretation of the Biblical text.

Deuteronomy 14:28-29 contains part of the national tax code for the nation of Israel. Every year, the Israelites were expected to contribute a tithe (10%) to the Lord in sacrifices, etc. This essentially provided income and food for the Levites since they had no property inheritance among the tribes of Israel. A second tithe was contributed to provide food and income for the Israelites themselves during those seasons when they celebrated the required feasts and were not able to work their land. In addition to these first two annual tithes, a third tithe was required every three years to provide for the poor, orphaned, widowed, foreigner, and Levites who lived in the community to make sure everyone was provided for and no one went hungry. "At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do." (Deut. 14:28-29) For those keeping score at home, that places at the annual tax rate for an Israelite household at about 23% and they would contribute freewill offerings over and above their tithes to the Lord.

Is an end to poverty possible? Yes, according to Deuteronomy 15:4-5. "But there will be no poor among you; for the Lord will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess— if only you will strictly obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today." If God's people will obey God's voice, contribute their tithes and offerings as commanded by the Law, and give generously to the foreigner, orphan and widow in their midst then the problem of "absolute poverty" disappears. However, this will be a continual process. A continual test the Lord will put before them according to Deuteronomy 15:11. "For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'" Human society is unequal by definition. People are not all given the same gifts and talents. People are not all given the same opportunities. People are not given the same resources. Furthermore, there are forces beyond our control that make a huge impact on our economy. Natural disasters. Wars. Death. Disease. Famine. Drought. Availability of natural resources. All exact a toll. Throw in the fact that some human beings simply work harder and smarter than others and the gap between rich and poor only seems to grow.

God recognizes this very human trend which is why He demands generosity from His people. We who are blessed must in turn bless others. For our blessing did not come from ourselves but from God. He commands Israel to always remember their time as slaves in Egypt. To remain humble and compassionate towards those who have experienced economic hardship and therefore sold themselves into slavery to pay off their debts. When the Sabbatical Year comes (every seven years), they are to release their slaves, forgive their debts, and help them get started in their new life. "And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him." (Deut. 15:13-14) The Sabbatical Year serves almost as an economic "reset" as the wealth of the nation – which God has provided - is redistributed in a way that closes the gap between rich and poor. This effectively addresses the "relative poverty" of the country and provides hope and opportunity for those who wouldn't otherwise have it.

It's an open question how often Israel actually kept the Sabbatical Year or what practical application it could have in today's global economy. But the principle remains. If we live our lives with the understanding that all we have has been given to us by God. All our wealth. All our talent. All our opportunity. Then it becomes a whole lot easier to live generously. To provide for others. To sacrifice our own lifestyles so that we might relieve the burden of poverty for those around us. Whether they live next door or on the other side of the globe. Jesus confirms what God said in Deut. 15:11 when he says, "For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me." (Matt. 26:11) This statement is not meant to make us throw up our hands in helplessness or just accept the current state of affairs. Instead, it is meant to drive us to generosity. To live like Jesus did. To lay down our lives so that others might live.

We are in the midst of tax season...how pleased is God with your giving over the last year? Are you growing each year in generosity? Do you have a plan to grow in this area of your life in 2018? Do you understand your God-given role in helping to solve the problem of poverty in our world today?

March 12, 2018

THE DIVINE POWER OF GOD'S WORD

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 16, 17, 18, 19

"And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel." (Deut. 17:18-20)

God intends His people to live as beacons of life in a culture of death. This requires us to be different. Set apart. Transformed. Counter-cultural. It requires us to have our minds and hearts shaped primarily by God's Word rather than the ways of this world. It forces us to think through what we consume on a daily basis from the media, social media, and other outlets. We have to ponder how much time we are truly spending meditating on the Word of God versus watching television or YouTube or scrolling through Facebook/Instagram feeds.

Surprisingly, God's people have always faced this challenge. They have always been at risk of becoming just like the pagan nations around them. The temptation is to go with the flow of the culture rather than take a stand against it. It doesn't matter whether we are talking about Philistines, Amorites, Edomites, Greeks, Romans, Germans, Russians, Communists, Atheists, Republicans, or Democrats. The temptation remains the same. To exchange our allegiance to God for something more culturally acceptable.

This is why God commands the future kings of Israel to take out a pen and paper (or quill and scroll as it were) and literally write out for themselves every single word of the Law of God. Their work will then be checked/graded by the Levitical priests. Assuming the king passes, he will then keep the Law with him day and night. He shall immerse himself in it. Meditating. Reading. Pondering. Praying. The goal here is not just rote memorization but something much deeper. To "learn to fear the Lord his God." And why is it important to fear the Lord? Because it is the beginning of wisdom according to Scripture. And we cannot live without wisdom. Not well. The other thing this daily practice of reading God's Law will do is humble the king. It will keep him from believing he is somehow higher or better than his brothers and sisters. It will keep him from making the mistake so many of the pagan rulers make when they start to believe their own hype. They start reading their own press. They start to believe they themselves are gods and have the divine right to rule. We see this in our own time in places like North Korea, Russia, and now China as Xi Jinping eliminates term limits. There is nothing that leads more quickly to tyranny than when a world leader starts to believe there is no authority higher than their own.

The same is true for each of us. As soon as we lose sight of the reign and rule of God over our lives. As soon as we stop reading God's Word and stop believing what it declares about us and our sinful condition before the Lord. As soon as we start believing the cultural lie that we are our own highest authority. That we know best. That we deserve whatever we can get out of this life. We are doomed. Our lives will descend into tragedy and suffering and pain. Our most important relationships will break under the strain. We will never find fulfillment or deep satisfaction because we will have lost sight of the greater purpose for which we were created. To love and to serve Almighty God. To live under His direction and command. To pursue holiness as we seek to honor God in all we say and do.

This passage really is a call to self-examination. A courageous self-inventory must be made. Where am I struggling to submit my life to the Lord? Where am I struggling to live under His authority? Do those I am in relationship with experience me as humble? Gracious? Self-sacrificing? When I look at my schedule, where is God? When I look at my spending habits, where is God? When I evaluate my life goals, where is God? Do these things reflect His Lordship? Have I brought them under His authority? Have I truly asked Him to shape the desires of my heart?

March 13, 2018
CHRIST BECAME THE CURSE

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 20, 21, 22, 23

Buried in all the discussion today about who gets stoned for what and when is this key passage that the Apostle Paul will pick up later in Galatians and apply to Christ. "And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance." (Deut. 21:22-23) Blessings and curses are a huge theme in Deuteronomy. If you do well, you will be blessed. If you rebel against the commands of God, you are cursed. And not just you but your family, your land, your friends and neighbors because every action we take has communal consequences. This is why God is constantly telling His people to expel those who break His law lest they defile the land.

Enter the Apostle Paul. He picks up on this theme of "blessings and curses" in the Book of Galatians. He is writing to a group of largely Gentile believers who are doing their best to keep the Law of Moses. The entire book is a forceful critique that draws a sharp contrast between life under the Law and life under the Spirit. "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.'" Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith." (Galatians 3:10-14) Basically, Paul argues that when we seek to justify ourselves by keeping the Law, we take on the curse because no one can actually achieve what the Law demands. Furthermore, he tags Abraham and reminds God's people that it is not the Law that justifies in the first place but faith! Abraham believed God and was justified. What then happens to the Law? What about all the curses that have piled up over the centuries through the failure of God's people to keep it? Christ literally becomes the curse for us! He literally takes our place and perfectly satisfies the Law's just demands. And the sign of this great salvific event is the Cross. The place where Jesus literally hangs on a tree, becoming cursed on our behalf. As we know, He doesn't hang there all night but is buried that same day in accordance with the instructions given in Deuteronomy so even in His death, He fulfills the Law.

This, in itself, is incredible news but Paul's not done! Not only did Christ remove the curse by His saving death, He also unleashed all the blessings! All the promises God made to His people from Abraham forward are now ours in Christ Jesus! All the blessings of obedience are given to us because of Christ's great faithfulness! This includes the very Spirit of God which is now our inheritance as adopted sons and daughters of God!

It is so easy to make the mistake of reading Deuteronomy and get crushed by the weight of expectations. We read about the blessings and curses and think immediately of our own lives and how often we fall short. We start to wonder and question our faith in God. We immediately recognize the gap that exists between who we are and who we should be. We look at the list and see all the things we should do that we don't do and all the things we do that we shouldn't do. An honest person knows they've sinned and fallen short of God's glory. An honest person knows they have done things that bring them under the curse. Even earned them death. An honest person looks at the sin of their life and experiences deep grief over what they have done. All that is good because it drives us to Christ! It brings us completely to the end of ourselves. The end of our pride. The end of our self-sufficiency. And it is there that Christ meets us with open arms. Hands and feet bearing the scars from where He hung on the tree. He embraces us. He lets us know all has been accomplished. The work of salvation has been finished. We are free.

March 14, 2018
FIRST FRUITS

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 24, 25, 26, 27

"A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O Lord, have given me.' And you shall set it down before the Lord your God and worship before the Lord your God. And you shall rejoice in all the good that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you." (Deut. 26:5-11)

The principle of firstfruits is an important one in the Bible. Simply put, when we produce whatever it is we produce, we are to take the first portion. The best portion. And offer it to the Lord. Before we take care of ourselves. Before we meet our own needs. Before we pay the mortgage. Before we head to the grocery store. Before we pay the bills. Certainly before we take that vacation. Before even putting money into savings or paying off debt. We are to give unto the Lord first.

Why? Is God short of cash? Does God need our money? Isn't this just a way for churches to manipulate God's people? How do I make sure the money actually gets to God or the people God loves? After all, I've seen celebrity pastors buy multi-million dollar homes! I've watched ministries spend all kinds of money on stuff that's not important rather than helping people! I've seen the abuse! I've seen the waste! Furthermore, I have all kinds of opinions on what my church should spend their money on. I don't agree with the way they do ministry or what they emphasize or how they operate. Why should I give them any money at all?

Those are great questions. And if we're honest, we've all probably asked them. But let's go a level deeper. Let's bring it closer to home. How are we spending our money? Are we actually any better than the church or organization we criticize? If we were to open our personal books and give ourselves an audit, what would we find? How much money did we waste in 2017? What extravagances did we indulge in? How much did we spend on stuff that's not important rather than helping others? It's a sobering exercise, is it not? The reality is we are all corrupted by sin and our natural tendency is to hoard our wealth. To spend it primarily on ourselves. To make sure we improve our lifestyles. To make sure we get our needs taken care of. To make sure we get to live the lives we believe we deserve. And after we accomplish that then maybe we'll throw a little money God's way just to hedge our bets. We find ourselves in worship with the offering plate coming towards us so we take out our wallet and give God a \$20. Throw Him a bone. Keep Him happy. And we walk away feeling like we at least did something.

According to the latest research, the average Christian gives 2.5% of their income away. (For comparison, during the Great Depression, the average was 3.3%.) Average giving by adults in Protestant churches across the United States is \$17/week. 37% of regular church attenders don't give at all. And the higher the income, the less likely a person is to tithe or give 10%. Only 1% of those making 75k or more tithe their income. That's the bad news. Here's the good news. About 10 million Christians give 10% or more totally \$50 billion dollars a year to churches and non-profits. 77% of those who tithe actually end up giving between 11-20% of their income away. And charitable giving grew in the US from 4.1% in 2016 to 4.6% in 2017 with the increase coming from individuals, corporations and foundations.

So back to the principle of firstfruits...why is it important? It serves as a reminder that everything we have comes from the Lord. Israel was descended from a wandering Aramean named Abraham. A man of no consequence other than the fact God chose Him to become the father of a mighty nation. His descendants immigrated to Egypt where they grew into a large and prosperous people until the Egyptians felt threatened and enslaved them. For hundreds of years they suffered until they cried out to the Lord for deliverance. God brought them out from Egypt with miracles and signs and wonders. He fought on their behalf. He defeated Pharaoh and his army. He provided for them in the wilderness. Fed them with manna. Brought water from a rock. And now He would bring them into the Promised Land. A land flowing with milk and honey. A land full of natural resources where they would flourish. None of this was their own doing. None of this happened through Israel's strength or ability or hard work. They are not masters of their fates or captains of their souls or in charge of their own destinies. They are God's people. His treasured possession. Among all the nations of the earth. So in recognition of this special status that they did not earn...they give. They offer the first and the best of what they have to the Lord.

So what about us? Do we do the same? Do we live our lives in recognition of all God has done for us? Do we offer Him the honor He deserves? Do we thank Him for where we were born? The family we were born into? The nation in which we get to live? The talents we are naturally endowed with? The opportunities He's given us along the way? The gifts we've received that we did not earn? And do we acknowledge His sovereign grace over our lives by offering back to Him our firstfruits of time, talent, and treasure? (Notice I didn't say time, talent OR treasure because we cannot substitute one for the other.) This is truly what it means to love God with all our hearts and souls.

March 15, 2018
BLESSINGS AND CURSES

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 28, 29, 30

Obey God and you will be blessed. Your family will flourish. You will never be defeated. Your crops will never fail. Your flocks will only grow. You will be healthy and wealthy and prosper in all that you do. Disobey God and you will be cursed. Your family will suffer. Your enemies will be victorious. Your crops will fail. Your flocks will miscarry. You will be sick and poor and everything you do will turn to ash.

If only things were that simple...

This is perhaps the most misused and misunderstood part of Deuteronomy. Perhaps even the entire Bible. Prosperity preachers love this part. Especially Deuteronomy 28:12-14, "The Lord will open to you his good treasury, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands. And you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. And the Lord will make you the head and not the tail, and you shall only go up and not down, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, being careful to do them, and if you do not turn aside from any of the words that I command you today, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them." They love to tell their listeners that if they will just obey God by sending in their money - "Sowing a seed" is the phrase they commonly use - God will make them the head not the tail. Their fortunes will only go up and not down. They will find healing for all their hurts. They will accumulate more possessions and earn more money than they know what to do with. All because they had faith and obeyed God.

If only things were that simple...

Life is not that simple. I've seen God's faithful suffer. I've seen their families struggle. I've seen the stock market crash and take their savings. I've seen natural disasters strike and destroy all they owned. I've seen cancer come out of nowhere and take the lives of some of the most godly people I've ever known. I've watched evil flourish. I've witnessed dishonest people get ahead. Horrible, manipulative, ungodly people flourish. And I've asked God how I can square what I've seen and experienced with what He says in His Word.

Here's God's answer...What does it mean to faithfully obey the voice of the Lord? (28:1) What does it mean to keep His commands and walk in His ways? (28:9) What does it mean to return to the Lord and obey His voice? (30:2) The key is not found in keeping His commands. Following God's Law is a means to a much greater end! As always, the key is the heart. "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." (Deut. 30:6) The key is living from the inside out rather than from the outside in. You and I cannot "work" our way to God. We can't "obey" our way to God. We can't "earn" our way to God. That's "outside-in" thinking! The idea that if we just follow God's commands faithfully enough we will be blessed is nonsense. Life with God doesn't work that way! It's not an equation. It's not an A+B=C kind of deal. So we can't look at our life - with all its ups and downs - and conclude that when life is up, God and I are good. Or when life's down, God and I are on the outs. That's not how life with God works.

It's just not that simple...

What God's after is the heart. Over and over again, He's makes this clear. Genesis. Job. Exodus. Leviticus. Numbers. Deuteronomy. The theme is consistent. God wants a family. A people with whom He will share His great love. Furthermore, He desires their love in return. Love Me with all your heart, soul, mind and strength! Return to Me with all your heart and soul! Love Me for who I AM! I AM the God who chose Abraham when he

was bouncing around Ur living life as a happy pagan. I AM the God who visited your forefathers and mothers. Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob and Leah and Rachel. I AM the God who delivered you from slavery in Egypt. I AM the God who guided and protected you in the wilderness. I AM the God who has brought you to the Promised Land. Yes, obey Me! Not because you have to or are forced to or because you are afraid of what might happen. No! Obey Me because you love Me and long to serve Me! This is the key! Loving God from the heart will NATURALLY lead to obedience which in turn NATURALLY leads to blessing! Don't get these confused! Don't put the cart before the horse! The goal here is NOT the blessings! The goal here is God! God must be our supreme treasure! God must be our heart's truest and deepest desire! God must be our all in all!

So is He?

Maybe it's simple after all...

March 16, 2018
THE SONG OF MOSES

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 31, 32, 33, 34

As we finish the Book of Deuteronomy, we need to pause for a moment and reflect on the life of Moses. Miraculously saved at birth. Raised in the palace of Pharaoh. Exiled for murder. Bedouin shepherd. Husband. Father. Called late in life to save Israel. Prophet. Miracle-worker. Deliverer. Spiritual and political leader of a nation of wandering ex-slaves. His life, especially the last third, was marked uniquely by his close relationship with God. Now we are at the end. Now the people stand on the borders of the Promised Land. Now he's on a mountain looking over at the fulfillment of all God has promised. Now is his last chance to share with his people all he has learned in his 120 years of walking with the Lord.

So Moses sings them a song...(Deut. 32:1-43)

"Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth. May my teaching drop as the rain, my speech distill as the dew, like gentle rain upon the tender grass, and like showers upon the herb. For I will proclaim the name of the Lord; ascribe greatness to our God! "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is He..." For Moses, everything begins with God. God's faithfulness. God's steadfast love. God's enduring grace. Without God, he is nothing. Without God, the people of Israel are nothing. Without God, they would still be slaves in Egypt. If God had abandoned them, they would have died in the wilderness. If Moses is going to sing about anything, it will be about the greatness of God! The glory of God! The majesty of God!

"They have dealt corruptly with him; they are no longer his children because they are blemished; they are a crooked and twisted generation. Do you thus repay the Lord, you foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you? Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you..." Moses also sings of the people he has served. He boldly reminds them of the truth. They are sinners. They are broken. They are rebellious. They despised God. They abandoned God. They doubted God. They disobeyed God. He sings, eyes wide open to the reality of their condition. He pulls no punches. He's not interested in sentimentality. This is his last chance to speak and he's not going to waste words on empty flattery.

"But the Lord 's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. "He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him, no foreign god was with him. He made him ride on the high places of the land, and he ate the produce of the field, and he suckled him with honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock. Curds from the herd, and milk from the flock, with fat of lambs, rams of Bashan and goats, with the very finest of the wheat— and you drank foaming wine made from the blood of the grape..." Back to God, Moses returns. It was God who first called Jacob. Found him in the wilderness. Loved him. Nursed him. Cared for him. Taught him how to walk. Taught him how to live. Guided him along the way. Always protecting. Always providing.

"But Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked; you grew fat, stout, and sleek; then he forsook God who made him and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation. They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods; with abominations they provoked him to anger. They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth..." What was the response of the people? Again, rebellion. As they grew strong and prosperous, they forgot God. They started going their own way. Doing their own thing.

Forgetting God. Seeking to be their own gods. They repeated the sin of Adam and Eve. They fell for the original temptation of the evil one. They gave in, wanting to live like gods themselves.

"The Lord saw it and spurned them, because of the provocation of his sons and his daughters. And he said, 'I will hide my face from them; I will see what their end will be, for they are a perverse generation, children in whom is no faithfulness...' So God judged them. Disciplined them in his wrath. He sought to purify and sanctify them through suffering. Through exile. Through wandering. Through defeat. He was faithful to remind them they held no power of their own. They had no strength of their own. All they had achieved had come via the mercies of God. He would not allow their illusions and self-deceptions to stand.

"For the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants, when he sees that their power is gone and there is none remaining, bond or free...See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand...Rejoice with him, O heavens; bow down to him, all gods, for he avenges the blood of his children and takes vengeance on his adversaries. He repays those who hate him and cleanses his people's land." It took God forty years to bring his people to their knees. But the long years of wandering were not in vain. Now they knew God. Now they saw God. Now they understood God. They submitted. They surrendered. They repented. And they were ready to enter the land He had promised.

Friends, this isn't just Moses' story. It's not just Israel's story. It's my story. It's your story. And this begs a really important question...when the years grow short and your strength begins to fail and you're surrounded by your family and those you love, what song will you sing? Will you sing of God and His great faithfulness? Will you sing of His mercies and kindness? Will you declare His glory and majesty? Will you make known His mighty works to the next generation? What song will you sing?

March 17, 2018
HARD QUESTIONS

Readings for the day: Joshua 1, 2 and Psalm 105

We are done with Deuteronomy! Great job everyone! Well done! You have now completed the Torah. The Pentateuch. One of the most important sections in all the Bible! I know it wasn't easy and I know the reading begged a lot of questions. This should happen every time we read Scripture reflectively and honestly and deeply. I love this verse from Joshua, "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success." (Joshua 1:8) It was one of the earliest I memorized after I became a Christian. But when we meditate on Scripture, it confronts us and forces us to ask some hard questions. Here are just a few that were posed today by some of you...

How can God, as Father, curse His children?

How can God, as Creator, be so cruel to His creation? Especially non-Jews?

Did Moses have a unique relationship with God or was he a cult leader along the lines of a Jim Jones?

How does the Old Testament speak to non-Jews about faith?

Am I worth saving? (A really, really, really important question!!!)

Let me see if I can take a stab at some answers...

The key to understanding is to put ourselves in God's shoes. Imagine you are a Father/Mother and you have children who are absolutely bent on self-destruction. They lie. They steal. They murder. They abuse each other. And this isn't just an occasional thing. It literally happens every hour of every day over weeks and months and years. It never ends. They are sociopathic in a way. They never stop. Now imagine you are not only a parent but you are also the primary civil authority in their lives. You have the power to punish. To judge. To sentence. And so you bring them before your "court." You show them mercy. You show them grace only to have them go out and continue their criminal activity. They are a danger to themselves and others. How would you respond? Would it not force your hand?

The same principle applies even more to the second question...How can God, as Creator, be so cruel to His creation? Especially non-Jews? Non-Jews were even more self-destructive. Their evil knew no boundaries. They had no law to restrain them. No prophet to teach them. It's essentially the story of Noah all over again. The evil in the world growing so great, God as the Righteous Judge, should wipe it out. But God made a promise. Never again to destroy the earth. So what's God to do? How are crimes to be punished? As the evil in humanity grows, how can it be restrained? Remember, we aren't just talking about a few sins here and there that we feel bad about but move on. We're talking evil. The worst kind of crimes happening over and over and over again. Every hour. Every day. Every week. Every year. It's relentless. It's not cruelty to sentence a murderer to death even in our world. It's not cruelty to sentence a rapist to life in prison. It is justice.

Justice is the key. What the Old Testament teaches us – and what we have the most trouble grasping in the 21st century – is that sin is serious. It is a crime against a holy God. Every sin is an act of rebellion. Sedition. Treason. And again, I cannot stress this enough, we commit these crimes every hour of every day of our lives. And the non-Jews in the Old Testament were much, much worse because they didn't have the Holy Spirit living inside them restraining their sin. It was a brutal, violent, evil world. Our God is not just a Father. He is a King. And justice and righteousness and holiness are real. Just as real as love and grace and mercy. God is all of these all at once. So when we consider our sin or Israel's sin or the sin of the non-Jews in the Old Testament, we have to view it through the lens of God's justice system. Sin is not just bad behavior but criminal activity and justice demands that crimes be punished.

Enter Moses. Was he a cult leader or did he really have a unique relationship with God? Such an insightful question! We've all seen or heard of cult leaders like Jim Jones, David Koresh, etc. We're rightfully horrified at the mind control, intimidation, and fear tactics they employ. Self-styled messiahs should be exposed for the charlatans they are in our world. So what makes Moses different? Or Jesus for that matter?

First and foremost, one has to decide if what Moses' preached and how Moses' led reflected the character and nature of God. Remember the key verse from Exodus 34:6-7? "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 3rd and 4th generations." Does Moses' teaching and leadership reflect this God?

I would argue it does. Moses acts as God's agent on the earth. At times, he executes justice. At times, he shows mercy. His primary job – which he failed at when he hit the rock twice in anger – was to show God's people the holiness of God. To declare God's glory and majesty and greatness to a people who so easily will forget. We always have to keep in mind that the "baseline" for God's people was sin. Unfaithfulness. Rebellion. Moses, through his actions, was continually calling them back to God.

Secondly, one has to grapple with the miracles he performed. If he truly parted the Red Sea, brought plagues on Egypt, brought water from a rock, etc. does this not in some way validate his message? Signs and wonders in both Old and New Testaments are meant to authenticate the message that is being preached. This is why healing miracles are often associated with Jesus' preaching. The miracles point to the truth of the message. Same is true with Moses. The miracles validate the message. For the life of me, I cannot think of any miracles performed by false prophets/cult leaders like Jim Jones, David Koresh, Adolf Hitler, etc.

Thirdly, there is a step of faith here. One has to decide whether the first five books of the Bible are truly the inspired Word of God or whether they are simply human stories. If the latter, then I do think it's tough not to come to the conclusion that Moses is a cult leader and these stories were written to justify the atrocities Israel committed. If, on the other hand, you believe the Bible tells the story – to use Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel's great phrase - of "God's search for man", then you have to conclude that Moses did have a unique relationship with God and therefore his actions/decisions were guided by God's hand and therefore just and right and holy.

So how does the Old Testament then speak to non-Jews about faith? Should we just bag the whole thing? (That's actually what the Nazi's under Hitler did by the way...) No, what the Old Testament teaches us is about the holiness of God. The righteousness of God. The justice of God that can NEVER be satisfied by human beings. No matter how hard we try to be faithful, we will always fall short. And this is a GOOD thing because it is setting the stage for the coming of the Messiah. The story of the Old Testament is indeed the story of God's unending, relentless search for man! He will not abandon them. He will not destroy them. He keeps coming back to them over and over again no matter how dark and evil their crimes against Him. From Adam to Noah. Noah to Abraham. Abraham to Moses. Moses to Samuel. Samuel to David. David to Exile. The story is all the same. Man's inevitable descent into madness and suffering and evil and self-destruction. Matched by God's great faithfulness. This is the story the Old Testament tells that sets the stage for the coming of Jesus. The ultimate act of faithfulness from a God who will never let us go.

And that leads me to the final question...One that is so very important. In fact, it is the key to understanding the whole Bible.

Am I worth saving? Whew. What a question! Here's the Bible's clear and unequivocal answer. No. You are NOT worth saving. I am NOT worth saving. There is NOTHING in me that is redemptive or holy or righteous or just.

The prophet Isaiah writes in 64:6, "All of us have become like one who is unclean and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags..." We are not worthy. In our natural condition, we deserve death. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else. And this has been the natural state of every single human being who has ever lived or ever will live. Psalm 51 says we are literally conceived in iniquity. We are broken. We are dead in our sin. We have no hope.

But God..."being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us...makes us alive together with Christ." (Eph. 2:4-7) Christ is worthy. I am not. This is the heart of the gospel.

March 19, 2018
STONE ALTARS

Readings for the day: Joshua 3, 4, 5, 6

"And Joshua said to them, "Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever." (Josh. 4:5-7)

When you think back on your life, where have you seen God at work? Where have you seen His finger touch down? Where have you witnessed Him working a miracle on your behalf? How do you remember such things? How do you mark such occasions? Israel built altars. They would take uncut stones and stack them together to remind themselves of God's great faithfulness. As we get deeper into the Old Testament, it will soon feel like the landscape just gets dotted with these altars. It's like you can't travel anywhere in Israel without stumbling over an altar they've made! Altars were significant. Especially in an oral culture where many of the stories were not being written down as they happened but instead told from father to son, mother to daughter. Passing by an altar was an opportunity for the family to pause and remember and re-tell the tale of God's great love and miraculous deliverance for His people. These altars formed something like a "scrapbook" or "Instagram" account for ancient Israel. A place they could go to be reminded of their most precious memories.

Of course, preserving the institutional memory of Israel was not the only purpose for these altars. There was an "evangelistic" component as well. "And he said to the people of Israel, "When your children ask their fathers in times to come, 'What do these stones mean?' then you shall let your children know, 'Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.' For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, that you may fear the Lord your God forever." (Josh. 4:21-24) Remember, God's great aim is to fill the earth with His glory. His great vision at the end of time is that of every tribe, tongue, and nation coming to bow in submission before His throne. Even here, Israel is being reminded of her calling to be a light to the nations. To reflect to the world the greatness and glory and majesty of God. Sometimes that will mean executing divine justice on the pagan tribes before them. Other times it will mean showing great mercy as will happen to Rahab and her family in Jericho. Through it all, God is making Himself known to the world in and through His people.

The same holds true today. God is making Himself known to the world through His people. His plan hasn't changed. His purposes haven't changed. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever! Where His people struggle, God brings comfort. Where His people fail, God brings discipline and judgment. Where His people step out in faith, God meets them and performs miracles on their behalf. This is who our God is and always will be!

March 20, 2018
JIHAD IN THE BIBLE?

Readings for the day: Joshua 7, 8, 9, 10

“But Joshua did not draw back his hand with which he stretched out the javelin until he had devoted all the inhabitants of Ai to destruction.” (Joshua 8:26)

“As for Makkedah, Joshua captured it on that day and struck it, and its king, with the edge of the sword. He devoted to destruction every person in it; he left none remaining. And he did to the king of Makkedah just as he had done to the king of Jericho.” (Joshua 10:28)

“And the Lord gave Libnah also and its king into the hand of Israel. And he struck it with the edge of the sword, and every person in it; he left none remaining in it. And he did to its king as he had done to the king of Jericho.” (Joshua 10:30)

“And the Lord gave Lachish into the hand of Israel, and he captured it on the second day and struck it with the edge of the sword, and every person in it, as he had done to Libnah.” (Joshua 10:32)

“And they captured Eglon on that day, and struck it with the edge of the sword. And he devoted every person in it to destruction that day, as he had done to Lachish.” (Joshua 10:35)

“So Joshua struck the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings. He left none remaining, but devoted to destruction all that breathed, just as the Lord God of Israel commanded.” (Joshua 10:40)

Herem. A notoriously difficult Hebrew word to translate. Roughly it means to “put something/someone under the ban” or “devote to destruction.” Less an act of war, it was more about worship. Ritual cleansing. God’s righteous and holy and terrible judgment against idolatry. Israel was His instrument. Chosen to enact this judgment against the Canaanites. And it was a brutal and terrifying as it sounds. It was jihad. Yahweh-sanctioned genocide. And we cannot – if we’re being honest – shrink back from the horror of it all.

Too many preachers attempt to justify God’s actions here. Soften them to make them seem more palatable. I will do no such thing. What I will say – and what we MUST grasp – is that Herem is fully in line with God’s eternal character. It is who God has revealed Himself to be. A God of righteousness and judgment and holiness. A God who hates evil and sin. A God who literally fights to eradicate these things from the earth. (i.e. “throwing large stones from heaven...”) And we want God to be this kind of God. We NEED God to be this kind of God! How else will things be made right? How else will judgment come on 20th century evils like Nazism, Stalinism, or the killing fields of Pol Pot? Don’t we demand God to be a God of justice when faced with these atrocities? Didn’t we, on some level, consider ourselves to be acting on God’s behalf...in service to His righteous cause...when we stormed the beaches of Normandy? Or defeated the “evil empire” of the Soviet Union? Were not those actions a form of jihad? Holy war against an unholy enemy?

But how does this God square with the God we see revealed in the New Testament? The God of love Jesus spoke so eloquently about? Here it is essential we remember how God defines love. It is not an abstract category or warm fuzzy feeling in the heart. It is not soft and sentimental. No, God defines love as sacrifice. Specifically, the sacrifice of His Only Begotten Son. “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:10) What we have to understand is the only reason we get to receive the grace of God...the mercy of God...the love of God...is because of what Jesus Christ endured on our behalf. The Father essentially put His own Son under the ban! Devoted Him to

destruction so that we may live! This, friends, is the love of God! The Father pouring out His righteous wrath and judgment on the Son! The Son willingly offering Himself up as the sacrifice for all humanity's sin! Enduring unimaginable pain. Unimaginable suffering. Separation from His Father. Death. Hell. God descending to the uttermost darkness. It was without a doubt the most horrific act of Herem in the history of the world. More terrible than genocide is decide. God allowing Himself to be murdered by His own beloved creation.

But this He did on our behalf. This He did to cleanse the earth of sin. Idolatry. Evil. Death. 1 John 2:2 says, "Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." God is the same yesterday, today and forever, friends! There is perfect congruence between the God of the Old and the God of the New Testaments. He acts in perfect concert with Himself. With His character and nature. He never deviates. As the old hymn suggests, "There is no shadow or turning with Thee! Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not. As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be!" Great indeed is God's faithfulness!

March 21, 2018
PERSPECTIVE

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

It's about this time every year in my Bible reading that I start to get weary. Worn down by all the bloodshed and violence. Worn down by all the God-sanctioned religious warfare. Worn down by the thoughts of men, women, and children dying in these cities as Israel conquers the Promised Land. I am worn down by a world I do not understand. Worn down by the brutality of it all. Worn down trying to understand how God is driving it all. I come to the end of my finite mind. I come to the end of my understanding. I come to the end of my ability to reason my way through. And I just sit with the horror of it all. Overwhelmed.

I recently had dinner with some friends. One of them does a lot of work in Rwanda with the mountain gorillas. He and his family have been engaged over there for decades helping with the research. He was there during the genocide. He saw the bodies piled up in the streets. Stacks upon stacks. It was horrifying. He can never get the images out of his head. If there's anything history has taught us, it is that man's inhumanity to man knows no bounds. The Killing Fields in Cambodia. The purges in Maoist China and Stalinist Russia. The Holocaust. And those are just the 20th century examples! The Mongolian conquest. The Crusades. The African slave trade. British occupation of India. Rome's brutal conquest of the Germanic tribes. For as long as human beings have walked this earth, there has been war. There has been violence. There has been suffering. In fact, some historians calculate that in the history of the human race, we've experienced four years of peace. FOUR! Can you imagine?

When human beings engage in such violence, they tend to pull on a common thread. God. God has ordained this war. God has sanctioned this violence. God is on our side. God commands us to fight these battles and destroy these enemies. But is this really true? I readily admit I have to struggle through the histories of the Old Testament more so than I do even Leviticus. I can make some sense of the law code but I cannot rationalize the death and destruction. So what's a faithful, Bible-believing Christian to do?

Three things help get me through this part of the reading every single year...

Joshua 5:13-15. At the beginning of the conquest, before the fall of Jericho, the commander of the Lord's Armies appears to Joshua. Joshua falls on his face before him and asks him if He is for Israel or for their adversaries. It's a great question. It's a common question. Essentially, he's asking the angel, "Are you for us or against us?" Are you on our side or their side? Are you team Israel or team Canaanite? I love the angel's response. "No, I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come." Basically, the only "side" I'm on is my own! I am no tribal deity. I am not like the other gods. I reign and rule according to my own sovereign purposes and plan.

My finite mind. My understanding of the world is shaped by time, culture, space, nation, etc. I am not an "objective" observer of history. There is no such thing. I have built in biases and assumptions that I bring to the table when I read the Word of God that act as "filters." These filters can be helpful or harmful depending on the text and will shape how I "receive" the Word of God in any situation.

Humility. I need to read with humility because I do not know all the answers. Nor will I ever. My questions and fears and doubts are real and I may not find satisfaction this side of heaven. That's okay. If there is a God who rules and reigns over the universe and if this God is good then I can ultimately trust Him. I can trust He sees things I cannot and He is orchestrating things to His own ends which ultimately are just and holy and righteous. There is one more thing I always try to keep in mind. My own sinfulness. The evil I carry in my own heart. Like the Apostle Paul, I do things I know I should not do. I don't do things I know I should do. Every day is full of sins of "commission" and sins of "omission" that negatively impact the lives of those I love and the lives of those I am around. The evil in the world is not just "out there" but inside of me as well. So I read with the understanding that but for the grace of God, I too deserve the ban. I too deserve the Herem. I too deserve death and destruction. And that moves my heart to praise and thanksgiving for what God has done in Jesus Christ.

March 22, 2018
STARTING VS. FINISHING

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

The key is not how we start the race but how we finish. I remember running in my first 5K when I was a young boy with my brothers. It was the Denver Symphony Run in downtown Denver. I remember the day was dreary and rainy. I remember pushing my way to the front of the start line with my brothers. I remember the starting gun going off and the three of us sprinting to the front of the pack. We led the race for about the first 100 yards. You probably can imagine what happened next. We spent the next three miles alternating between jogging and walking as we struggled to finish. It was a painful experience.

Israel sprints out of the gates in their conquest of the Promised Land. They win victory after victory. Joshua's leadership is exceptional. His tactics strong. His strategic decisions brilliant. Always in the right place at the right time. Anticipating. Attacking and counter-attacking. It reminds me of the movie, *When We Were Soldiers*, and how Colonel Hal Moore seemed to make every right move. The first campaign comes to an end. Israel is now firmly and deeply entrenched. They are the new power to be reckoned with in the region. But Joshua cannot be everywhere all at once so now it is up to each tribe to go out and secure their allotment. They are to go out with the same boldness and courage that so marked Joshua and complete the conquest. They are to place their trust in God and His ability to fight on their behalf. But they fail. They fall short. They lose heart. So the Jebusites remain in the territory of Judah. The Gezerites remain in the territory of Ephraim. Other Canaanites remain in the territory of Manasseh. As they struggle to uproot those already living in the land, they start to grow afraid. Afraid the military might of those who oppose them. The iron chariots and those fortified in the hill country. They are afraid they won't succeed. They take their eyes off of Yahweh. They forget His faithfulness. They give into their fear and the conquest is never fully completed.

Finishing is hard. How many folks start this race we call the Christian faith only to wither along the way? Jesus knew this about us and He even told a story once about a farmer who went out to plant his seeds. Some seeds fell on the hard path. Some seeds fell among the rocks. Some seeds fell among the weeds. Other seeds in good soil. Each tried to take root. The seeds on the path had nowhere to go so they were eaten by the birds. The seeds among the rocks had no place to put down roots so they sprung up quickly but then died. The seeds that fell among the weeds also sprung up but were eventually choked off. Finally, the seed that fell on good soil produced a bountiful harvest. What makes up the soil of your heart? Did the seeds of the gospel ever find purchase in your heart? Did they spring up only to die for lack of roots? Did the cares and the worries of this world choke off your faith? Or are you producing a harvest of righteousness? Are you finishing the race?

March 23, 2018

WITNESS

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

"The people of Reuben and the people of Gad called the altar Witness, "For," they said, "it is a witness between us that the Lord is God." (Josh. 22:34)

What does it mean to be a witness? And what are we "witnessing" to? For the tribes of Israel, the altar by the Jordan was built to remind them they were all part of one large family. Deeply connected by their common kinship with Abraham but also their covenant with God Himself. The tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh were concerned that future generations might forget this connection and start to see the Jordan River as the boundary between God's people and the rest of the world. They didn't want to be left out so before they crossed the Jordan to take possession of their inheritance, they built a monument of "imposing size." Not for burnt offerings. Not for sacrifices. But a witness to all of Israel that they were one people under Yahweh. Every time an Israelite would pass by the monument, it would "witness" to their shared history and deep connection.

In the Book of Acts, Jesus calls us "His witnesses." We are witnesses in our neighborhoods, cities, nations, and to the very ends of the earth. In this way, we are living memorials to all God has done. We are living monuments to a shared history. A common heritage. The deep connection we share as God's chosen people. We "witness" to the glory and goodness of God. We "witness" to the unity we share as the family of God. Anytime someone "passes us by" or interacts with us on any level, they should leave having "witnessed" the mercy and grace of God and having felt the deep love we have for one another.

Ultimately, the Bible itself is the pre-eminent witness. I love what Joshua 21:45 says, "Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass." The only reason we know this statement is true is because we have an accurate record of what took place. This is why we read the Old Testament. Within its pages, God "witnesses" to us over and over again of His great faithfulness and love. Even in the face of our sin. Even in the face of our rebellion. Even in the face of our evil. Even in the face of all our brokenness, God pursues us. God relentlessly chases us. God never lets us go.

I know reading through the Bible in a year is not easy! It indeed is a "monument of imposing size!" But as sit with God's Word and prayerfully reflect on all He has to say, we are shaped and formed in ways we cannot begin to imagine.

March 24, 2018
WHO'S YOUR SPIRITUAL HERO?

Readings for the day: Joshua 23, 24, and Judges 1

My grandfather was my spiritual hero. A man who loved and served Jesus for over ninety years. He started preaching at 14. He didn't stop until he was in his late eighties. After retiring from full-time ministry and moving into a retirement community, he hooked on part-time at a local church and did all the visitation and pastoral care for the graduated care facility. I remember sitting with him in his living room and reading the Bible together after I became a Christian. He had read through the Bible who knows how many times over the years. It was my first time through. In the middle of our time together, he paused and said, "hmmm...never seen that before." I said, "What do you mean? Haven't you read through the Bible like a million times, granddad?" "Yes", he replied, "But there's always more to discover." When I graduated from seminary, granddad was dying. He had a few months left to live. He was living in a room with grandma who was catatonic from Alzheimer's and was suffering from some paralyzation due to a burst cyst in his ear. My mom warned me he probably wouldn't be able to talk. I walked into the room and for the next TWO HOURS he proceeded to talk my ear off about life and ministry and my future as a pastor. He was so proud. So excited. It was like he had been saving up all his words just for me. He "went the way of all the earth" just two months later. He and grandma died within two weeks of each other. It was the first funeral I performed as a pastor.

One generation rises. Another falls. But the promises of God remain the same. "Therefore, be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left...Be very careful, therefore, to love the Lord your God...And you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one word has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one of them has failed." (Josh. 23:6, 11, 14) Think of all the things Joshua had seen! Slavery in Egypt. The plagues. The parting of the Red Sea. God meeting with His people on Sinai. The Ten Commandments. Manna from heaven. Wilderness wandering. Water from rocks. The parting of the Jordan. The incredible victories against all odds. The beginning of the conquest of the Promised Land. What a life! And through it all, what marked Joshua was this unwavering commitment to serve the Lord. To love the Lord with all his heart and soul and mind and strength. Joshua was a worthy successor to Moses and led God's people well. And now at the end of his life, he challenges the people to carry on! To continue to trust God! To walk in faith and see the fulfillment of all God has promised!

"Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Josh. 24:14-15) Choose this day whom you will serve. The question reverberates throughout history. Every generation is called upon to answer. Will we love and fear and serve the Lord? Or will we bow down to the gods of our own making? The gods of our culture? The gods we once served before coming to faith?

As for me and my house...we will serve the Lord!

March 26, 2018
LIFE IS STRUGGLE

Readings for the day: Judges 2, 3, 4, 5

"Life is pain, highness." - Dred Pirate Roberts

I grew up in the 1980's so the Princess Bride is one of my favorite movies and the line above is one that's always stuck with me. The Dred Pirate Roberts has lived a life of incredible struggle and heartache and pain. He's persevered through hardship and suffering. He's overcome incredible obstacles. He's survived impossible odds. The princess, on the other hand, has lived a life of privilege. Growing up amidst all kinds of wealth and splendor. Servants to meet her every need. At the same time, she too has suffered loss. Heartbreak. She grieves over the one she loves whom she believes is dead. I don't want to spoil the ending for those who haven't see it but

suffice to say both characters have learned and grown and battled through life. It's not been easy.

"Now these are the nations that the Lord left, to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before...They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses." (Judges 3:1-2, 4)

Israel failed. She lost her nerve. She took her eyes off of Yahweh and succumbed to fear. As a result, the Promised Land was not fully conquered. The pagan nations not fully driven out. They remained as a perpetual test to Israel's faithfulness. Would they stay true to the commandments of the Lord or would they follow the ways of the Canaanites? The Book of Judges tells the tragic tale of Israel's descent into darkness and evil. All the skeletons in Israel's closet are exposed and put on display for generations to read. The moral character of many of the judges is suspect. Their conduct immoral. Their decisions unwise. It's a story of compromise. A story that depicts what happens when we try to embrace the ways of God and the ways of the world. It's a story where the faithfulness of God is revealed in His discipline and loving correction. Over and over again, He will give the people of Israel over into the hands of their enemies. He will withdraw His protective hand from them. He will allow the nations around them to conquer and pillage and destroy; all in order to bring Israel back to repentance. Back to faith. Back to Himself.

Israel must learn to fight because life is a struggle. In the ancient near east, the struggle was literal. Real. It took place on battlefields and within cities. It was a violent, brutal, harsh world full of pain. Israel would need to know how to fight back and defend herself. In the 21st century, we still fight these battles. I think of our military men and women who go all over the world to defend the weak and oppressed. They fight against tyranny with such courage. I think of our police officers who put themselves in danger in the line of duty each and every day. Every call that comes in is a potentially violent situation they will be forced to handle. I think of our firefighters who are called to save lives, often at great cost. I think of so many in our world today who, day in and day out, see the suffering firsthand. They are well-acquainted with the pain. They know the heartache. And they fight. But even more serious and pervasive are the battles we face on the inside. The battles with depression, anxiety, and fear. Despite the incredible wealth and privilege and blessing we live with, we have never been more stressed. More discontent. More anxious and afraid.

We are being tested, friends. Day in and day out. Will we keep the commands of the Lord? Will we devote time to Him every day? Will we worship Him as He deserves and demands each week? Will we take a Sabbath? Will we give sacrificially and generously? Will we allow our hearts to be shaped by deep reflection on His Word? Will we surrender to His Spirit? Life is struggle. Life is pain. Life is not safe or easy. Anyone who says differently is selling something. (Again with the Princess Bride lines...) Does this mean things are hopeless? Should we just throw in the towel? By no means! God promises He will bear His fruit in the lives of those who walk with Him! Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Goodness. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control. These are the gifts of God for the people of God. In the midst of all life is throwing your way, turn to Christ! Let Him be your strength and your hope! Your shield for the battles you fight!

March 27, 2018

HUMILITY

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

One of my favorite books is by Andrew Murray. It's a classic titled Humility. A short little read with insights packed into every page. Here is how he defines humility. "Humility is nothing but the disappearance of self in the vision that God is all...The highest glory of the creature is in being only a vessel, to receive and enjoy and show forth the glory of God. It can do this only as it is willing to be nothing in itself, that God may be all. Water always fills first the lowest places. The lower, the emptier a man lies before God, the speedier and the fuller will be the inflow of the diving glory."

I think we can all agree humility is a virtue sorely lacking in our world today. The spirit of our age is arrogance, pride, criticism, entitlement, and self-indulgence. It infects our politics. It infects our workplaces. It infects our schools. Our homes. Our neighborhoods. Even our churches. Perhaps especially our churches. It's the spirit of the Pharisee. The spirit of self-righteousness. An unwillingness to submit to any other authority in our lives except our own. This includes God. Sure, we know how to say the right things. "God is first in my life!" "I love God the most!" "God is my all in all!" We sing songs that declare these truths. We sit through sermons where these truths are proclaimed. We tell these things to our Christian friends. But one look at our schedule. One look at our bank account. A glance at our Twitter feed, Instagram, or Facebook account. A moment of honest self-reflection. All these conspire to reveal what we really believe. We are our own gods.

Gideon was different. Not perfect. Not blameless in his generation. Not powerful and mighty among men. No, what marked him was his humility. The angel of the Lord found him treading out grain in a winepress. Providing for his family at great risk to himself. When the Lord called him to become the next judge over Israel, Gideon echoes Moses at the burning bush. "Who am I that you would send me?" So unsure of himself, he puts God to the test by laying out a fleece not once but twice! God honors his humble heart. Gideon was humble enough to place his faith and trust into action. He tears down the altar of Baal. He sends home his entire army before battle. And then when confronted at the beginning of Judges 8 by the Ephraimites who wanted to claim the glory, he humbled himself before them and honored them. It's a stunning display. Finally, when it is all said and done, the people want to make him king. He refuses the crown. He refuses to take God's rightful place in their lives. In the words of Murray, Gideon understood "the highest glory of the creature is in being only a vessel, to receive and enjoy and show forth the glory of God."

What about us? What does humility look like in our own lives? Surely, it is more than words. It is life lived intentionally under the sovereign authority of God. A life lost in the vision that God is all. A life lived before God, submitted to God, surrendered to God. What does such a life look like in the 21st century? It is a life of worship. Daily. Weekly. It is a life of Sabbath rest. It is a life of prayer. It is a life of reflection on the Scriptures. It is a life of service to the Kingdom. It is a life of devotion to our Lord. It is a life that intentionally directs all its resources – time, talent, treasure – towards God. It is a life that engages the world while remaining set apart. A life of risk where safety and comfort are sacrificed for the sake of the gospel.

Rest assured, such a life is not easy to live in our world today. Not with the demands on our time. Not with the demands on our resources. My wife and I were talking about it this morning as we looked at our schedule for the week. We signed our daughter up for a dance event that benefits a good cause but it will mean her missing Maundy Thursday worship and spending most of Holy Saturday at the dance studio. We regret our decision. More than that, we repent of our decision. Because we failed to put God first this Holy Week and this is only one of many small examples where I fail to give God the glory and honor He deserves.

March 28, 2018
JEPHTHAH'S SACRIFICE

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

When we travel to Ethiopia, we often head into the rural areas to visit village churches. As we walk along the dirt paths, we pass home after home. Most of them are mud huts surrounded by a little brush fence. In the evenings, we see children driving whatever livestock (donkeys, chickens, goats, etc.) the family owns into the enclosure. This keeps the animals safe and the house warm. It's a common custom all over the Middle East even to this day.

Hopefully, this places Jephthah's tragic vow in context. He fully expected the first thing to greet him when he returned home to be a goat or a sheep or some other animal. He most certainly did NOT expect it to be his daughter! So when she comes dancing out of the home with her tambourine, he tears his clothes. He instantly regrets the vow he made. He feels trapped. And how does his daughter respond? Her reaction is perhaps the most surprising part of this story. She willingly lays down her life for her father! She faces her fate with courage and faith. Taking two full months to say goodbye and grieve with her friends. Two full months to weep over what could have been.

It's a story that baffles us on a lot of levels. How could Jephthah sacrifice his own flesh and blood? How could Jephthah's daughter willingly lay down her life? And where is God in all of this? Is He pleased? The cultural distance between this world and our own is almost insurmountable. However, one key to understanding is Judges 11:23-24, "So then the Lord, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them? Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the Lord our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess." Everyone in the ancient near east believed in the gods. Dagon for the Philistines. Chemosh for the Amorites. Molech for the Ammonites. Every tribe had their own deity. Make the right sacrifices and you were awarded with great wealth, military might, and political power. Make the wrong sacrifices and your deity would turn his face from you, resulting in defeat. One some level, the same held true for Israel. As they adopted the ways of the Canaanites, Yahweh ceased, on some level, to be the One True God and became just another tribal deity to be appeased. Thus, Jephthah's tragic choice to sacrifice his daughter and her tragic choice to accept her fate. And the most important takeaway from the whole account is God's silence. Nowhere does the Bible say God is pleased with Jephthah's decision.

What about us? We claim to worship the supreme God of the universe. We claim to know the King of kings and Lord of lords. We claim to be heirs of His eternal Kingdom. But do our lives reflect this truth? How much have we accommodated to the ways of this world? Brought God down to our level? Limited Him to our tribe? Reduced Him to our personal deity?

March 29, 2018
WHEN HEROES FALL

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

I grew up in church. Sunday school every weekend. Learning the Bible stories via flannel board. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Noah on his ark. Moses parting the Red Sea. Joshua and the battle of Jericho. One of my favorites was Samson. For a young boy, what's not to like? Strength. Power. One man winning victory after victory culminating in a final heroic act of self-sacrifice where Samson literally brings the roof down on his enemies!

As I got older, I began to learn about all the stuff my Sunday school teachers left out. (Rightfully, by the way, as I was too young to understand.) Adam and Eve's rebellion and descent into sin. Noah and his family being saved but at incredible cost. Moses parting the Red Sea but often ending up in these violent clashes that would end in entire families being wiped out. Joshua devoting entire cities to destruction. And Samson. Morally compromised. Selfish. Immature. A man who seems to use his God-given gifts for his own gain and self-gratification. What are we to make of such unlikely heroes? Men and women who are subsequently enshrined in the great "Hall of Fame" of faith in Hebrews 11?

First and foremost, we are to see them as they are...not as we wish they would be. They are men. They are women. As such, they are sinners just like us. People whom God chooses to use despite our shortcomings, failings, and immorality. This is one of the best arguments FOR the trustworthiness of Scripture. It paints an honest picture of God's chosen people. Putting their weaknesses on display right alongside their strengths. Compare that to the sacred writings of other major world religions where heroes are whitewashed to perfection.

Second, we are to look beyond them to the true source of their strength. The true source of their wisdom. The true source of their miracles and great victories. It is the Spirit of the Lord that rushes on Samson and gives him the ability to tear a lion apart. Kill a bunch of Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. Trap and tie torches to hundreds of foxes. Tear off a city gate. Bring an entire building down around him. This is not Samson's doing. It has very little to do with the length of his hair. That's superstitious nonsense! No, not cutting his hair was simply an outward sign of the Nazirite Vow his parents had taken on his behalf before he was even conceived. (Judges 13:2-5) Keeping the vow was a sign of his devotion and dedication to the Lord, the true source of his strength. When he treated his vow casually or flippantly by allowing his wife to nag him to death, his strength left him. Again, not because he cut his hair but because in so doing, he despised the Lord.

Finally, the entire book of Judges is meant to lead us to despair. Each judge over Israel seems less and less capable of leading well. They are increasingly morally compromised. Increasingly losing sight of the One True God. Increasingly abandoning the ways of the Lord and following their own paths. In fact, the city of Dan – a major city in the Northern Kingdom of Israel – will continue to be a city known for its idolatry. Jeroboam will put one of his golden calves here in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. So what begins with violence and idolatry by the tribe of Dan will continue until the day God sends the Assyrians to wipe out the northern kingdom altogether.

Why drive us to such despair? To teach us yet again of our need for God. Over and over again, the same narrative is reinforced. Humanity is hopeless. From Adam and Eve to the Great Flood. From Noah to the Tower of Babel. From Abraham to slavery in Egypt. From Moses to the end of Judges. With each generation, man's inhumanity to man only grows. Only increases. Only becomes more pervasive. And we would be lost except for God. He continues to pursue us. He continues to reach out to us. He continues to be faithful even in the face of our unfaithfulness. The climax of this story is, of course, something we celebrate this Holy Week. Jesus' suffering. Jesus' death on a cross. Jesus' burial in a grave. Jesus' resurrection. God's ultimate and final victory over sin and death.

March 30, 2018
HEART OF DARKNESS

Readings for the day: Judges 19, 20, 21

Today we encounter some of the most difficult material in all of Scripture. We see Israel at one of her lowest points. She has forgotten Yahweh. She has become like all the pagan tribes around her. She is more focused on her own gratification than she is on serving and honoring the Lord. Her world is full of idols and sexual perversion and violence. Yes, she still goes through the motions. She still makes her sacrifices. She still prays. Fasts. Appears before the Lord at the appointed times. But it's all empty at this point. Everyone is doing what seems right to them. They are all following their own ways. They are plumbing the depths of sin. They are pushing the boundaries of evil. Unspeakable atrocities are taking place in Israel such as the gang rape of a woman whose body is then dismembered resulting in a genocidal war that basically annihilates an entire tribe. It's madness.

One of my favorite books is the Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad. With penetrating insight, he describes the nature of man. Given the right conditions. Given the right set of circumstances. We will all succumb to temptation. In the book, Kurtz sets himself up as a god to be worshiped. He exploits those around him. He uses them for his own personal gratification and enjoyment. He is evil and selfish and insane. Towards the end of the story, he finds himself dying as he "returns" to civilization. His life flashes before his eyes. He reflects back on all he has done. And his final words are, "The horror! The horror!"

Horror. It's a good word to describe what we read today from the book of Judges. There simply is nothing redemptive in the story. Nothing good. Nothing godly. Man's inhumanity to man is on full display. It's dark. It's evil. It's terrifying. Horror. It's a good word to describe what's going on in our world today. One only has to scroll through a Twitter news feed to see the hate that leads to violence that leads to death and then return the next day to watch the cycle repeat itself. Horror. If we're totally honest, it's a good word to describe what goes on in all of our hearts. All of us are perpetrators. All of us are victims. We are the Levite. We are the concubine. We've sacrificed others and we've been sacrificed for the sake of self-protection and self-gratification. In the Bible's judgment, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Romans 3:10-18)

Perhaps it's providential that we read this section of Judges on Good Friday. Today we reflect on the Cross. On the death of God. The most horrific act in human history. We reflect on the price Jesus paid. The blood He shed. The penalty He bore. Today we reflect on the suffering He endured. The pain He experienced. The heartbreak of betrayal. Today we reflect on the depth of our sin. The depravity of our nature. The darkness of our hearts. Today we reflect on the cost of our salvation. On what it took to redeem us from sin and death. To deliver us from evil.

Today we also reflect on our salvation! God plunging Himself into the horror of our condition! Plumbing the depth of our darkness! Immersing Himself in the breadth of our madness! And embracing us as His own! Today we declare there is hope for the Levite and his concubine! Today we declare there is hope for the Kurtz's of our world! Today we declare there is hope even for us! And that hope is found in Jesus!

March 31, 2018
REDEEMER

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

I love the book of Ruth. It upends so many expectations and helps us understand the heart of God. Ruth is a Moabite. A foreigner. A sojourner. She married an Israelite named Chilion and became part of his extended family. This was forbidden by the Law of God but it took place during the time of the judges when everyone was doing right in their own eyes. Tragedy strikes. Her father-in-law, Elimelech, dies. Ten years later both her husband and his brother die as well. This puts the whole family in dire straights. There are no men to work. No men to protect them. So Naomi makes the decision to return home. She encourages her Moabite daughters-in-law to do the same. Start over. See if they have better luck with a new family because hers has brought them only grief. Ruth refuses. She makes this extraordinary declaration, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16) So powerful is her statement that we often hear it read at weddings thousands of years later!

Ruth not only returns with Naomi to Bethlehem, she cares faithfully for her mother-in-law. She puts her life at risk by going out to the fields to glean what was left after the reapers had made their way through. It was backbreaking, painstaking work. Women who did this were often molested, harassed, and abused. They were the poorest of the poor in the land. Completely without hope. In the providence of God, the field she chose belonged to a man named Boaz. A righteous man. A man who left the gleanings for the poor as the Law of God demands. (Lev. 19:9-10) A man who protected her from the men who worked for him. A man who included her among his own young women so she wouldn't be alone. Even invited her to sit and eat at his table. Boaz is a man who clearly honors the Lord. I love what he says to Ruth when she asks him why she has found favor in his eyes. "The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!" (Ruth 2:12)

Naomi cannot believe their good fortune! Ruth has been led by God to the very fields of the man who can redeem them! (Lev. 25) A man who is a close enough relative to bring them into his family and continue the family line! Thus unfolds this beautiful courtship in chapter three where Ruth goes and lies at Boaz's feet to ask him to take them in. Boaz is humbled by the request and makes the necessary arrangements to become their kinsman-redeemer. They get married. Conceive a son. The family line continues which is important since her great-grandson is King David! Furthermore, many generations hence, her descendant Joseph will marry a young pregnant woman named Mary and they will have a son named Jesus. The Great Redeemer who will save His people from their sins!

After all the bloodshed and violence and suffering and pain, it is nice to read that not all was lost in Israel. Even in the time of the judges, there were still faithful men and women who followed the Lord. It is a great reminder to us in our own time that the night is always darkest right before the dawn. Today is Holy Saturday. A day where Christians reflect on the death of their Lord. His body lying on a cold slab. Wrapped in a burial shroud. Death seemingly having the victory. Sin and Evil seemingly having their way. The Son of God seemingly defeated. We wait this day with baited breath for we know what tomorrow brings! Victory! Jesus rising from the grave! Jesus throwing open the door of the tomb! Death could not hold him! Hell could not defeat Him! Sin and Evil had no power over Him! Jesus is our Great Redeemer! Jesus is our Great Savior!