

BIBLE IN A YEAR

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

Links to Bible Text are through www.biblegateway.com using the
English Standard Version

2018

STUDY AND COMMENTARY

BY

**DR. DOUG RESLER
SENIOR PASTOR
PARKER EVANGELICAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

WWW.DOUGRESLER.COM

© Doug Resler 2018

Please notify of any errors in this document by sending an email to pepcharvest@gmail.com

MAY

May 1, 2018 GRACE

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 8, 9 and 1 Chronicles 18

May 2, 2018 THE LORD'S SIDE

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 10, 1 Chronicles 19, Psalms 20, 53, 60, 75

May 3, 2018 HISTORY

Readings for the day: Psalms 65, 66, 67, 69, 70

May 4, 2018 #METOO

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 11, 12, 1 Chronicles 20, and Psalms 51

May 5, 2018 SIN AND SALVATION

Readings for the day: Psalms 32, 86, 102, 103, 122

May 7, 2018 DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 13, 14, 15

May 8, 2018 THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF THE BIBLE

Readings for the day: Psalms 3, 4, 13, 28, 55

May 9, 2018 CONSEQUENCES OF FAILING TO FORGIVE

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 16, 17, 18

May 10, 2018 DEEPER PRAYERS

Readings for the day: Psalms 26, 40, 41, 58, 61, 62, 64

May 11, 2018 DIVISIONS

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 19, 20, 21 and Psalms 5, 38, 42

May 12, 2018 ALL THAT REALLY MATTERS

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 22, 23, and Psalms 57

May 14, 2018 THE LORD REIGNS

Readings for the day: Psalms 97, 98, 99

May 15, 2018 PRIDE AND POPULARITY

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 24, 1 Chronicles 21, 22, and Psalm 30

May 16, 2018 PEAKS AND VALLEYS

Readings for the day: Psalms 108, 109

May 17, 2018 LEAVING A LEGACY

Readings for the day: 1 Chronicles 23, 24, 25, 26

May 18, 2018 THE GREATNESS OF GOD

Readings for the day: Psalms 131, 138, 139, 143, 144, 145

May 19, 2018 GENEROSITY

Readings for the day: 2 Chronicles 27, 28, 29, and Psalm 68

May 21, 2018 PERSONAL GOD

Readings for the day: Psalms 111-118

May 22, 2018 THE GODFATHER

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 1-2 and Psalms 37, 71, 94

May 23, 2018 IF YOU LOVE ME...

Readings for the day: Psalm 119:1-88

May 24, 2018 WHAT WOULD YOU ASK FOR?

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 3-4, 2 Chronicles 1, Psalms 72

May 25, 2018 THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WISDOM AND FOOLISHNESS

Readings for the day: Psalms 119:89-176

May 26, 2018 SEX AND GOD

Readings for the day: Song of Solomon 1-5:1

May 28, 2018 LOVE AS STRONG AS DEATH

Readings for the day: Song of Solomon 5:2-16, 6-8, and Psalms 45

May 29, 2018 THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

Readings for the day: Proverbs 1-4

May 30, 2018 TEMPTATION

Readings for the day: Proverbs 5-8

May 31, 2018 INTEGRITY

Readings for the day: Proverbs 9-12

May 1, 2018

GRACE

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 8, 9 and 1 Chronicles 18

There's a famous story told about John Knox, the founder of Presbyterianism in Scotland. He had a nightmare as he lay dying. When he awoke, he told all his friends that he had just been tempted to believe he had earned heaven and God's grace through the faithfulness of his life and ministry. But he quickly followed that up with these words, "Blessed be God who enabled me to beat down and quench the fiery dart, by suggesting to me such passages of Scripture as these; 'What hast thou that thou didst not receive? 'By the grace of God I am what I am'. 'Not I but the grace of God which was with me'.

It is so easy to think we deserve God's grace. It's so easy to believe we've done enough. We're good enough. We're strong enough. We've worked hard enough. Yes, most of know the dictionary definition of grace - "unmerited favor" - but if we're honest, deep down we like to think we deserve it. Don't believe me? Think about how much we take God for granted? How little we value our time with Him? How easy it is for us to prioritize other things rather than keep God first? Think about our attitudes towards worship? Towards obedience? We like to act as if God is grading on a curve! We are so flippant about grace.

Today, however, we come face to face with grace in the story of David and Mephibosheth. David is now king. He has the nation firmly united behind him. He is winning battle after battle. Expanding their territory. Gaining tribute. Philistines. Moabites. Syrians. Edomites. All fall before him. Most kings, in their efforts to consolidate power, would seek out the last surviving members of the former royal family and have them put to death. Not David. David remembers his covenant with Jonathan. David remembers his promise to Saul. He seeks out the last surviving members of Saul's family in order to honor them. Bless them.

Enter Mephibosheth. Crippled. Weak. Broken. Living in abject poverty – Lo-debar literally means "no pasture" - where he has fled to hide. For years, he has eked out an existence hoping to escape the notice of the new king. Knowing what would likely happen should he be found out. But now he's been betrayed. His location is known. The king's soldiers show up to bring him before David. One can imagine his fear. One can imagine all the nightmare scenarios running through his head. He comes before David and bows his face to the floor at his feet. He begs for mercy though he knows he doesn't deserve it. And what's David's response? Grace.

Friends, we are Mephibosheth. We are crippled. Weak. Broken. We too live in abject spiritual poverty. We too have fled to hide from the King. Many of us have lived this way for years. Putting our heads down and barely eking out an existence. Enslaved to our sin, we tried as best we could to escape God's notice. But the Holy Spirit sees all and knows all. He found us out! He sought us out! He brought us before the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! Perhaps you remember the day that happened? The first day you actually humbled yourself before Jesus? I remember my fear as the weight of my sin hit me for the first time. I remember the sense of impending judgment hanging over my head. I remember how unworthy I felt before the Holy One of Israel. I remember asking God for mercy as I prayed the "sinner's prayer." And what I remember most of all is that feeling the first time grace washed over me.

Grace has nothing to do with me. Nothing to do with what I've done. Nothing to do with how good I am. It has everything to do with God. By showering us with grace, God is being faithful to Himself. Faithful to the covenant promises He has made. Grace takes the wounded, crippled, and broken and sets a place for them at God's table. Grace seeks out the spiritually disabled, those lost and wandering in darkness, enslaved to sin, dead in their trespasses and presents them before God. Grace goes to the most barren places, rescues the spiritually poor, and brings them to a place of plenty, where we are fed with the richest of fare. Most of all, grace takes those orphaned by sin and adopts them into God's own family!

Now here's what we most often miss about grace. It doesn't take away our brokenness. Mephibosheth remained crippled for the rest of his life. In the same way, we too remain crippled by our sinful nature. Why does God allow this? Again, the answer is grace. As Mephibosheth limped around the palace, leaning on his crutches, he was reminded over and over again of the amazing grace of the king. As you and I continue our struggle with sin. Tempted. Afflicted. Oppressed. We are being reminded over and over again of the amazing grace of our own King. That takes a wretch like me. Once lost. Now found. Once blind but now can see.

May 2, 2018
THE LORD'S SIDE

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 10, 1 Chronicles 19, Psalms 20, 53, 60, 75

The Super Bowl had just ended. The Eagles won an improbable victory behind their backup quarterback Nick Foles. The confetti is raining down. The music is blaring. The players are celebrating on the field. A reporter finds Doug Pederson and asks him for his reaction to the big win. "I can only give the praise to my Lord and savior Jesus Christ for giving me this opportunity." Nick Foles, newly crowned MVP, sees God's hand in the big win as well. "All glory to God!" He exclaims. It's a common scene that gets played out after almost every big win in every sport college or professional across the US every year. Players and coaches honoring God for their big wins. Thankful to God for providing the victory.

It reminds me of David's words from Psalms 20. "Now I know that the Lord saves his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with the saving might of his right hand. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God." (Psalms 20:6-7) David has just won significant victories over the Ammonites and Syrians. He has subdued their lands. Defeated their armies. Killed their generals. Historians of this particular time tell us David was a powerful warlord who took advantage of a power vacuum in the region to carve out his kingdom. Egypt, the dominant power for so long, was weak. Assyria and Babylon had yet to rise. As David wins victory after victory, he steps up to the postgame mic to give God all the glory.

Now there's nothing wrong with ascribing to God all the glory for our successes in life. After all, He is the one who gave us our gifts and talents. He is the one who provides blessing and opportunity. We didn't choose where we were born. We didn't choose the family we were born into. So much of our success has nothing to do with us at all and so God rightly deserves all the praise. At the same time, we must not become arrogant. We must not assume God is "always" on our side or that God is "always" on the side of the victors. In a few chapters, David will find out what happens when he takes God's favor for granted. I have often watched the same athletes who praised God in victory have nothing to say in defeat. I have seen Christians praise God when things are going well in their lives only to question where God is when times get tough.

One of my favorite coaches, Mike MacIntyre of my Colorado Buffaloes, won a big victory a few years back. A reporter caught up with him as he was running off the field. "God was with us in the victory today but He was also with us through every defeat leading up to this point." Now that's a man who understands God! You may be experiencing a season of great blessing in your life right now. A season of success. A season where everything you touch seems to turn to gold. Or you may be experiencing loss. Tragedy. Struggle. Heartbreak. No matter what season you find yourself in, God is with you! God is for you! God will never leave you or forsake you! Simply turn to Him and you will find your joy and your strength no matter what comes.

May 3, 2018
HISTORY

Readings for the day: Psalms 65, 66, 67, 69, 70

I still remember one of my professors in college walking to the board on the first day of class and writing in big block letters the word, "HISTORY." "History", she said, "is all about 'his' story and the first thing we need to do is reclaim this word for the rest of us." She then took out an eraser and re-wrote "HISTORY" as "HERSTORY" or "HYSTORY." Now, admittedly, this was a Women's Studies course at the University of Colorado at Boulder. So perhaps I should have expected something like this. And my initial reaction was pretty sarcastic and dismissive. However, over the years, I have come to believe the professor was more right than she knew at the time. History truly is "HIS STORY." That is to say, it's God's story. It's the story of God's engagement with His world and His people.

The Psalms express these deep theological truths so very well. David writes about creation. "O God of our salvation, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas; the one who by his strength established the mountains, being girded with might; who stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples, so that those who dwell at the ends of the earth are in awe at your signs. You make the going out of the morning and the evening to shout for joy." (Psalms 65:5-8) He writes about redemption. "Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds toward the children of man. He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There did we rejoice in him, who rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations— let not the rebellious exalt themselves." (Psalms 66:5-7) He speaks to God's sovereignty. "Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth." (Psalms 67:3-4) He speaks to God's tenderness and comfort. "But as for me, my prayer is to you, O Lord. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love answer me in your saving faithfulness." (Psalms 69:13) The beauty of the Psalms truly is the full range of human emotion and experience that gets expressed.

When you reflect back on your own life, what do you see? Do you see God's hand at work? Do you sense God's presence in times of crisis? Are you able to see God's sovereign hand guiding and directing your steps? Where have you experienced God's love? When did you encounter God's grace? God is just as active in our personal histories as He is in human history.

May 4, 2018
#METOO

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 11, 12, 1 Chronicles 20, and Psalms 51

It is estimated by the World Health Organization that 1/3 of women worldwide are victims of sexual abuse. A 2017 poll taken by ABC News and the Washington post reports that 54% of American women have reported receiving unwanted and inappropriate sexual advances, most of which is never addressed. The #MeToo movement first got started in 2006 when Tarana Burke used the hashtag in social media to draw attention to the struggle of women of color, particularly in underprivileged communities. However, it really gained steam when the allegations of Harvey Weinstein were first made public in 2017 and it has since spread like wildfire through all sorts of different industries. Hollywood. Media. Corporations. Government. And yes, even the church.

Frankly, the reckoning is long overdue. For too long, the church has protected men who abuse and men who tolerate abuse. High profile cases in the Roman Catholic Church are matched with similar high profile cases in the Protestant world such as the Sovereign Grace scandal or the recent allegations made against Bill Hybels and Willow Creek. In a social media world, there is no longer any place to hide which is a very good thing.

The great heroes of the Bible have their own #MeToo moments. The story of David and Bathsheba is perhaps the most famous. David, flush with his success on the battlefield and drunk on his own power and privilege, decides to stay home rather than head off to war. As he stands on the roof, proudly overlooking all he has accomplished, he catches a glimpse of the beautiful Bathsheba bathing beneath him. His heart fills with lust. He covets this beautiful woman and who's around to stop him? The army is off at war. Her husband is one of David's mighty men which suggests David knew Bathsheba already. Perhaps this was a secret desire he'd been entertaining for years. He calls for her. Commands her to come. With her life on the line, she obeys and conceives a child from their one night stand. Now comes the coverup. David sends for Uriah but Uriah refuses to cooperate. So David orchestrates his murder.

It's a horrible story. One we cannot and should not reduce to a morality tale. Bathsheba is raped. Uriah murdered. A child dies. All because of David's insatiable lust and appetite for power. Left to his own devices, David might have gotten away with it. But God was watching. God is always watching. "For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun." (2 Samuel 12:12) God sends Nathan the prophet, David's own brother you'll remember, to confront him. Nathan risks his life to stand up to David. Expose his sin. Call him out.

Yesterday, legendary Bible teacher Beth Moore penned a poignant essay on her blog about her experiences with men over the years. It's a heartbreaking read. She shares how it's felt to be dismissed, ignored, put down, disrespected, and objectified. Her words are honest. Direct. Forthright. And offered in a spirit of Christ-like confrontation and love. They must be heard and she's not alone. There are women who occupy the pews and seats every Sunday who've had similar experiences and they too must be heard. Their stories must be shared. And men who occupy places of privilege and power must humble themselves to listen. To repent. Like David.

Psalm 51 is a beautiful Psalm. It expresses exactly what godly, humble repentance looks like. It acknowledges honestly our brokenness. Acknowledges honestly our sin. And begs God to create in us a clean heart. A right spirit. A broken and contrite, God will not despise.

May 5, 2018
SIN AND SALVATION

Readings for the day: Psalms 32, 86, 102, 103, 122

The more I spend time with people, the more I am convinced that so much of our pain and heartache and struggle is because we do not truly understand who we are. We have a distorted self-image. We look in the mirror and we are blind to the true nature of the person looking back at us. This is why reading and re-reading and re-reading Scripture is so important. Within the pages of this precious book, God teaches us the deepest truths about ourselves. The narrative runs something like this...

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:27) You and I were designed to live in a world of perfection. A paradise called Eden. We were made in the image of God so that we might show forth the glory of God. We were given dominion and authority and power to rule over all God has made as a kind of vice-regent or undershepherd.

"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." (Psalms 51:5) We abandoned our vocation. We rebelled against God. We aspired to be gods ourselves. In so doing, the image of God was marred. Corrupted. Poisoned. Every single human being since Adam and Eve's fall has been born in brokenness. Born in sin. Conceived in iniquity. From the moment the sperm fertilizes the egg, we are lost.

"Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.'" (John 3:3) We are lost but we are not hopeless! Out of love, the Father sent His only Son into the world that whosoever would believe in Him would not perish in their sin. All who believe in Christ are born again. Born a second time. This time of the Spirit.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17) Being born of the Spirit literally changes our DNA. Changes the fundamental reality of our existence. Gives us a new nature. A new heart. A heart of flesh sensitive to the leading of God to replace the heart of stone that was so rebellious and resistant. The image of God is now restored. Our vocation renewed. The commission re-issued. Go. Make disciples of all nations. Baptize. Teach. Fill the earth. Subdue. Have dominion. Share my glory with all of creation.

"In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed." (1 Corinthians 15:52) The final promise. Jesus will come again. On the last day, a trumpet shall sound. The heavens will open. The dead will rise. And we shall be changed from one degree of glory to another. The imperfect shall be made perfect. The perishable shall be made imperishable. Sin and death will be destroyed. Eternity sets in. We are home.

This is the fundamental worldview of the Psalmist. It's the fundamental narrative they are singing about though the revelation of Jesus as Messiah still lies far off in the future. They trust in the steadfast love and faithfulness of the Father to bring about His will on the earth. They also understand this side of heaven that we are broken, sinful, corrupt creatures in desperate need of God's grace. And grace only comes as we confess. As we repent. It's more than feeling bad. More than feeling guilty. More than feeling ashamed. It's about turning from our sin. Turning towards God. Making the necessary changes in our lives in response to all God has done for us.

"Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered...I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin." (Psalms 32:1, 5)

What do you need to confess today? Where have you fallen short? Where do you feel enslaved? Afflicted? Ashamed? Guilty? In what areas of your life has the Spirit brought conviction? Is it your thoughts? Attitudes? Actions? Feelings? The life of a believer in Jesus is one of constant confession as we come before the Lord acknowledging our sin, receiving His grace, and learn to follow in His ways. Does this mean we should live our lives in constant guilt? Live our lives in constant shame? Absolutely not! God's love is everlasting! And His promise is sure! "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." (Psalms 103:11-12) Cling to the love of God, sinner! Let His love be the cornerstone of your life! Let His grace set you free! Trust in His faithfulness to save you from depths of your sin!

May 7, 2018
DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 13, 14, 15

All families live with some level of dysfunction. Dysfunction occurs where unhealthy behavior (rage, addiction, abuse, neglect, etc.) is normalized, leading members of a family to make unhealthy accommodations rather than pursue repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Left unchecked, dysfunction leads destructive patterns of behavior that often impact generations as unhealthy coping skills are passed down from parent to child. Breaking generational cycles of sin is extremely difficult and requires incredible courage as well as sacrifice as dysfunctional family systems often violently resist change.

Consider the family of King David as the pre-eminent Biblical example of a dysfunctional family system. Of course, his situation was made much more complex by the cultural practice of polygamy which led to many children by many different wives and concubines, all seeking to ascend the line of succession. Dynastic considerations complicate what we read today but many lessons can be drawn that are helpful in our own lives. Amnon is the oldest son of David and heir apparent to the throne. As such, he has grown accustomed to power and privilege and simply taking what he wants when he wants it. His treatment of Tamar, his half-sister, is horrific in its own right but probably emblematic of how Amnon lives his life. Absalom is not much better. What begins as a noble desire to protect his sister from public shame ends in murder and a coup attempt against his own father. Who knows what prompted Absalom's move against David but it clearly was pre-meditated and even assisted by some of David's closest confidants. David doesn't help matters much. As king, he should have punished Amnon for his crime but instead appears to give him a pass. Once Absalom takes matters into his own hands, David appears both relieved and appalled. He refuses to forgive and reconcile with Absalom which only isolates him further and divides the royal household. David chooses to ignore the growing conspiracy until it's almost too late and thus has to flee into exile. His family shattered. His kingdom divided. His country on the brink of civil war.

I think of my own family system. We've spent the last year in counseling together as we try to break patterns of sin that have not only been passed down but reinforced by our own sinful choices. I have had to learn to deal with my anger issues. Wrestle with my own fears and failures and disappointments. I've had to face the fact that I have caused my children pain through the choices I've made in how I've responded to the difference circumstances we've had to face as a family. I've had to take a long hard look at myself through Christ's eyes and repent. Ask for forgiveness. And pursue reconciliation. It's not easy. It requires humility and sacrifice. I have to relinquish my need for control. My need to protect my kids from the consequences for the choices they make in life. My need to project "success" to the world around me. I've had to come to grips with the fact that my family is as broken as any and I am a major contributor to that brokenness because of my own sin issues. Honestly, it's a painful journey. Then again, dying to self is always painful.

What about your family system? If your family's story was included in the Scriptures, what would others see? What failures? What successes? Would they see patterns of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation? Or would they see pride, neglect, abuse, addiction, and rampant conflict? Or perhaps a mixture of both? Where is Christ at work in your family right now? What areas do you need Christ to pay particular attention to in order to bring healing, wholeness, grace and peace? Are there particular family members you need to be praying specifically for? Who are they? What are the issues? How are you contributing to the pain? Ask Christ to help you chart a different path. One that leads to true transformation.

May 8, 2018

THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF THE BIBLE

Readings for the day: Psalms 3, 4, 13, 28, 55

The Bible is such a strange book. One of the great mysteries of history is why this book survived when so many others were lost. Why has this book exerted such a gravitational pull on human beings of every tribe, tongue, and nation down throughout the centuries? Why is it that three billion people in the world today claim to follow its teachings? It certainly is not an easy read. Sixty-six different books written at different times by different authors. Hundreds of chapters. Thousands of verses. It's hard to get through even in a year. Then there's the content. War. Ethnic cleansing. Rape. Murder. Deceit. Privilege. Power. The "spiritual heroes" the Bible lifts up as examples are all deeply flawed. Abraham almost sacrifices his son. Jacob schemes his way to the top. Moses is a murderer. Noah is a drunk. David steals another man's wife and then has him killed when he won't participate in the coverup. These are the men after God's own heart? Can you be serious?

This morning, I was re-reading a wonderful essay by Karl Barth. Barth is considered the greatest theologian of the 20th century and he insightfully points out that we often come to the Bible asking all the wrong questions. He writes, "It is precisely not the right human thoughts about God that form the content of the Bible, but rather the right thoughts of God about humans. The Bible does not tell us how we are supposed to talk with God, but rather what God says to us. It does not say how we are to find our way to Him, but how God has sought and found the way to us. It does not show the right relationship into which we must place ourselves with Him, but the covenant which God has made with all those who are the children of Abraham in faith, and which God has sealed in Jesus Christ once and for all. This is what stands in the Bible. The Word of God stands in the Bible."

What makes the Bible different than every other book in history is that it contains within its pages the very Word of God. It tells a story. A grand narrative about God's eternal search for man. He is relentless. He is steadfast. He is patient. He never tires. Never rests. Never relaxes. Never takes a day off. He pursues. He chases. He keeps covenant faithfulness with His people. He is loyal. He is true. Despite all they do. Despite all their sin. Despite all the corruption and degradation and evil, God never leaves them. This is why a man like David can compose poetry after stealing Bathsheba and having Uriah killed. Because this story isn't about David. It's about God and what God's doing in David's life.

"But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head." (Psalms 3:3)

"In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety." (Psalms 4:8)

"I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me." (Psalms 13:6)

"The Lord is the strength of his people; he is the saving refuge of his anointed." (Psalms 28:8)

"But I call to God, and the Lord will save me." (Psalms 55:16)

Now I get these verses are interspersed among a whole lot of other stuff that's not nearly as pleasant. Calls for vengeance. Calls for the bloody destruction of David's enemies. Bitterness. Anger. Feelings of betrayal and loss. There's a whole lot of darkness in the Psalms and yet even amidst the deep darkness, God's light has this way of breaking through. God has this way of making Himself known.

Such is true for us as well. When we honestly come before God. When we cry out to him from the deepest places of our hearts. When we throw off every pretense and lay aside our "holy facades". What does God hear? Fear. Desperation. Pain. Struggle. Heartache. Anger. Bitterness. All of us have a deep well of darkness within us called sin. All of us draw from that well every single day. Left to ourselves, we would wander in the darkness permanently. We would have no hope of escape. But thanks be to God that He still pursues His people! Still chases after us with His love! He will never rest until His light scatters the darkness of our hearts and makes all things new.

May 9, 2018

CONSEQUENCES OF FAILING TO FORGIVE

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 16, 17, 18

There are consequences when we fail to forgive from the heart. Consequences when we fail to reconcile. Consequences when we fail to follow God's will and seek to restore broken relationships. The impact of those consequences tend to be commensurate with the authority and power and influence we wield. So a parent who refuses to take this step with their child can impact future generations. An employer who refuses to take this step with employees can cost a company. A pastor who refuses to take this step with her/his congregation can disrupt a congregation.

David was a king. A man who held the power of life and death in his hands. A man whose authority was supreme and final. The impact of his decisions impacted not just him or his household but a nation. This is true not only in the Absalom narrative but also at other times in David's life. There is a ripple effect to the decisions he makes. When he makes good and godly decisions, the nation is blessed. When he makes poor and ungodly decisions, the nation is cursed. As we read yesterday, David's refusal to execute justice when his daughter Tamar was raped creates a crisis in his family that eventually spreads to the nation. Absalom takes matters into his own hands leading to his exile. David brings him back but refuses to forgive him from the heart and restore him to his place. In his isolation, Absalom begins to conspire to steal the kingdom. David seems blissfully unaware as the Absalom's influence grows. He's almost caught completely by surprise when the news finally comes and he has to flee for his life. The ripples grow as allegiances shift and new alliances are formed. Ahithophel sides with Absalom. Hushai with David. Joab goes with David so Absalom makes Amasa his new general. Abiathar and Zadok stay in Jerusalem as priests but remain loyal to David. Shimei curses David. Ziba makes his move to take over what's left of the household of Saul. Everyone, it seems, is looking out for themselves. Such is the chaos that happens when forgiveness and reconciliation are ignored. It leads to all kinds of brokenness, suffering, and pain.

We've all probably had this experience. A friend says something or does something that hurts. We refuse to forgive. Now the rest of our friends feel forced to choose sides. A marriage breaks up. Divorce papers are signed. Once again, friends and family feel forced to take sides. A business deal goes south. Partners split up. Lawyers are called to divide up the assets. Clients and customers are pressured to shift their loyalties. Seasons of ministry come to an end. Pastors are let go. Forced out in some cases. Congregations split. Such experiences are painful and never easy. Too many of us take the path of least resistance which is avoidance. Abandoning the relationships we once enjoyed because forgiveness is too hard. Reconciliation too much. The way of Jesus too difficult.

And yet, His words continue to haunt us. Continue to push us. Continue to convict us. Forgiveness and reconciliation is ESSENTIAL to the Christian life. Face to face, coming to terms with our brothers and sisters is REQUIRED by Jesus if we are to call ourselves His disciples. We are not given any other options. Any other choices. Jesus wants His family to be unified not just in name but from the heart.

"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us...For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matthew 6:12, 14-15)

"Then Peter came up and said to him, 'Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.'" (Matthew 18:21-22)

"And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." (Mark 11:25)

Think of the pain that could have been avoided had David listened to God. Think of the pain in our own lives that could be avoided if only we would listen to God. Who is Jesus calling you to forgive today?

May 10, 2018
DEEPER PRAYERS

Readings for the day: Psalms 26, 40, 41, 58, 61, 62, 64

What is prayer? Communion with God. On our knees. Folded hands. Eyes closed. Forming thoughts in our minds and sending them upwards like sparks from a fire? Is it a conversation or more of a monologue? A task we have to complete each day if we want to stay on God's good side? Something we do before meals or before bed? Is it the recitation of memorized words learned as a child and carried through to adulthood? "Now I lay me down to sleep..." "Bless us, O Lord, and these, Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen." "God is great. God is good. Let us thank Him for this food." "Our Father, who art in heaven..." What is prayer?

The Psalms are the prayerbook of the Bible. 150 different prayers written by different people on different occasions as they wrestled with life. Readers of the Psalms are always struck by their raw honesty and transparency. The beautiful way they express the deepest emotions of the human heart. The vivid descriptions of God and His great faithfulness. They are marvelous and great teachers when it comes to prayer.

One of the biggest things I've learned in the years I've spent meditating on the Psalms is that prayer comes more from the heart than the head. Prayer is less about me forming thoughts or saying words or reciting texts and more about laying before God the deepest emotions of my heart. Deep prayer doesn't require much in the way of words. Just letting the feelings flow and trusting God is hearing what's behind them. This is what makes David such a great Psalmist. He doesn't seem to stop to think about the "appropriateness" of his feelings. He doesn't seem to "judge" his emotions. He just lets them fly up to God and trusts God is big enough and great enough to make sense out of the chaos.

It's why he can express contradictory emotions all in the same prayer. "I hate the assembly of evildoers, and I will not sit with the wicked...O Lord, I love the habitation of your house and the place where your glory dwells." (Psalms 26:5, 8) He feels no need to try to make sense of it all. He trusts God can sort it out.

He can express his anger and desire for vengeance against those who hurt him. "O God, break the teeth in their mouths; tear out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord! Let them vanish like water that runs away; when he aims his arrows, let them be blunted. Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime, like the stillborn child who never sees the sun...The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked. Mankind will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth." (Psalms 58:6-8, 10-11) And almost in the same breath, be so tender. "Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us." (Psalms 62:8)

Ultimately, the Psalms give us permission to be real and authentic before God. To truly be ourselves. To put aside all pretense and performance and let drop the masks we so often wear.

May 11, 2018
DIVISIONS

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 19, 20, 21 and Psalms 5, 38, 42

We are a fickle people by nature. Driven by our emotions, we struggle to forgive. Struggle to reconcile. Struggle to work past our pain. Our differences. Our jealousies. Our frustrations. Our failures. This struggle leads to division as we each go our own way.

David grieves for his son Absalom and almost loses his kingdom a second time.

The ten tribes of Israel grow jealous of the tribe of Judah and rebel a second time under the leadership of Sheba.

Shimei comes before the king seeking forgiveness for his rash words when David was fleeing for his life. Abishai wants to execute him on the spot.

Mephibosheth and Ziba both lay claim to the king's favor.

Joab kills Amasa in cold blood out of anger at being relieved of command.

Israel suffers because of an ungodly act committed by King Saul against the Gibeonites and makes atonement through human sacrifice.

We humans have a tendency to make a mess of things. It is just so hard for us to take a step back and see the bigger picture. We are highly reactive creatures. Refusing to give others the benefit of the doubt. Refusing to extend grace to those who have hurt us or disappointed us or let us down. We would much rather hold onto our anger. Hold onto our pain. Keep a detailed record of wrongs that we can trot out anytime we feel threatened or afraid. We justify our actions or inactions and the cycle of division continues.

Think about how we do life these days. We jump from church to church to church, never really putting down roots. Just as soon as we are let down or disappointed, we move on. Always with a "godly" justification, of course. "I'm not being fed." "I don't feel connected." "I don't like this pastor or that leader or they didn't meet my needs." It's just easier to move down the street to the next church rather than work through our issues. Think about the number of different denominations that exist today. While some diversity may be legitimate, the fact that we divide over such petty, non-essential issues is a stain on the Body of Christ. It is direct rebellion against the command of our Lord to be one, even as He and the Father are one.

But it's not just churches who have this issue. It is society as a whole. Republicans and Democrats can't even exist in the same room anymore. Conservatives and liberals see themselves as mortal enemies. How many parents have I watched switch their kid to a different sports team rather than work through disappointment and conflict? (Seriously, how many different soccer or baseball clubs do we really need in Parker?) How many schools and teachers have watched families walk out their door because of a bad experience rather than sit down and work through the issues? The examples are legion in our culture today.

Division leads to weakness. The inability to face our fears, admit our failures, and work through problems creates a lack of resiliency in both the individual and society as a whole. Emotional. Spiritual. Even physical. We simply lack the capacity to process our pain and disappointments in a healthy way. We look for someone to blame. We attack. We accuse. We react. We rush in. And the results are often tragic.

So what's the answer? Confession. "For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me...I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning...I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart. O Lord, all my longing is before you; my sighing is not hidden from you." (Psalms 38:4, 6, 8-9) Humility. "But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you. Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me." (Psalms 5:7-8) Seek God. "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?" (Psalms 42:1-2)

May 12, 2018
ALL THAT REALLY MATTERS

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 22, 23, and Psalms 57

I recently attended a prayer luncheon where the keynote speaker shared his testimony. Brought up Communist, he became a rising star and leader in a student revolutionary movement in college. His influence became dangerous which led to him leaving his studies to hide out in the mountains of his country. There he continued to draw followers until he and his small group of friends had amassed an army of 150,000. They engaged in guerrilla warfare for a number of years until they eventually invaded the capital city and overthrew their own government. He became Prime Minister. For five years he held his position until he eventually was betrayed by his close friend and imprisoned on crimes of corruption. It's tough to know what's true and what was politically motivated but in the man's own words, "he was the chiefest of the chiefs of sinners." He was a man of violence. A man who lived with a gun in his hand. He was a man of power. A man who enjoyed exercising authority over others. He was a man of great appetites. Using his power and influence to gratify his own desires. His end came as swiftly as his rise to power.

Because of his great influence, he was put in solitary confinement for years. No bed. No toilet. No place even to wash his hands. He suffered tremendously. He was lonely. He was afraid. One night, he had a vision. Jesus appeared to him. Offered him release in exchange for belief. He didn't answer right away. Things got worse. In the depths of his pain and heartache, he cried out for Jesus' return. The next night, the vision came back and this time the man got on his knees. He gave his life to Christ. Everything changed.

As I listened to this man's testimony, I was reminded of King David. David too was a man of violence. A man who was raised from a young age to a position of power and influence. A man who used that power and influence to gratify his own desires on more than one occasion. David too was a man of great contradictions. Capable of amazing love and generosity and grace in one moment and brutal, horrifying, seemingly capricious violence in the next. And now here he is at the end of his life still composing praise songs to God!

What are we to make of such a man? Wrong question. What are we to make of such a God? A God who would love a man like David? A man like the one I heard recently? A man like me? We are all people of great contradictions. All of us are capable of great good and great evil. Capable of great beauty and great ugliness. Capable of amazing acts of generosity as well selfish acts of greed. Perhaps this is why David kept writing his poetry? Perhaps he knew this truth deep down? Despite all his sin. Despite every mistake. Despite the people he had hurt along the way. David's confidence was in the Lord.

"The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge, my savior; you save me from violence. I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies." 2 Samuel 22:2-4)

Where is your confidence today?

May 14, 2018
THE LORD REIGNS

Readings for the day: Psalms 97, 98, 99

I find it easy to get discouraged. My wife tells me it's because I pay far too much attention to the news on my phone and I will readily admit I have a difficult time turning it off. The more I travel globally, the more I find my heart broken. Bombings at three churches in Indonesia. Riots and death in Gaza. Ebola outbreaks in west Africa. Brutal crackdowns on fellow Christians in China. Andrew Brunson imprisoned for his faith in Turkey. The deeper the Spirit takes me into Christ, the more these events effect me. I am often troubled when I pray. I often find myself brooding over the chaos of the world. Wondering when God will finally put an end to it all.

I am just as troubled for events here at home. The plight of the poor. The racial strife that persists. The rage that seems to simmer under the surface of our society. I am baffled by the ability of people to walk away from relationships they've cultivated for years. Troubled by our wide-spread lack of resiliency. Our inability to process disappointment and pain in healthy ways. The deeper the Spirit takes me into Christ, the more I realize how essential forgiveness and reconciliation are to the life of any community. Be it a family, church, school, business, town, etc. We simply cannot survive without it and yet fewer and fewer people seem capable of grace.

I am broken by the personal experiences I've had recently. Walking with a family through the suffering and death of their five-year old son and grandson. Spending time in conversation with them. Praying with them. Loving them. Heart breaking for them. Walking with another friend through a recent cancer diagnosis. A man I respect and admire in so many ways fighting now for his life and his future after a tumor the size of a beach ball was removed from his abdomen. A couple I know struggling to hold their marriage together. Children I love fighting depression and anxiety. Yes, I know this is part of what I signed up for as a pastor but it doesn't make it any easier. I am no Superman. My heart breaks on almost continual basis for those I love and have the privilege to serve.

How I needed today's reading from the Psalms! "The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice. Clouds and thick darkness surround him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side. His lightning lights up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth. The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all peoples see his glory." (Psalm 97:1-6) What a declaration of hope! God reigns! Not God will reign. Or God has reigned. But God reigns! The present tense! He reigns over the chaos. He reigns over the pain. He reigns over the disease and death. He reigns over it all. Globally. Domestically. Locally. Personally. God reigns! And because God reigns, I can be glad. Even in the midst of all my fears. Even as I stumble under the weight of all my burdens. Even when I am discouraged or troubled or broken. God reigns. I can rejoice. "Light shines on the righteous and joy on the upright in heart. Rejoice in the Lord, you who are righteous, and praise his holy name." (Psalm 97:11-12)

Now I know many will argue this doesn't change a thing. It's not like war and violence and sickness and suffering are going away anytime soon. They will use world events as evidence to push back against the idea of a good and holy and righteous and sovereign God. They will argue it's impossible for God to be all these things when there is so much wrong in the world. This leaves us with one of only two conclusions, so they say. Either God isn't good. Isn't holy. Isn't righteous. And perhaps just doesn't care. Or God is not sovereign. He is not all-powerful. He doesn't reign and is at the mercy of the same forces we are that operate with such seeming impunity in our world. And if I didn't have faith. If I hadn't encountered God personally. If I didn't know God on an intimate level, I might be tempted to agree.

But I believe. I have faith. Even in the darkness, I trust the light will one day dawn. Even when the world is crashing down around me, I trust the One who holds all things in His hands. Even when the lives of those I love seem to be falling apart, I trust the One who holds all things together. God is reigning! God is on His throne! God is sovereignly directing all things for His glorious purposes! So I will sing! I will “sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations. He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.” (Psalm 98:1-3)

May 15, 2018
PRIDE AND POPULARITY

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 24, 1 Chronicles 21, 22, and Psalm 30

More and more studies are being conducted on the impact of social media on our mental health. The results are scary. It is becoming clear that prolonged social media use presents like addiction with similar accompanying symptoms. (Neglect of personal life, mental preoccupation, escapism, etc.) When people attempt to stop using social media, they go through something akin to withdrawal. The more we use social media, the less happy we seem to be and the more socially isolated we become. The comparisons social media invites between our lives and those we are connected to is not good for our well-being. Furthermore, social media (which includes all the different apps with a social component to it) is specifically designed to trigger dopamine “highs” in the brain. Dopamine release is triggered by unpredictability, small bits of information that can be digested quickly, and most importantly, reward cues. (i.e. number of “likes” on FB, number of “followers” on Instagram, number of “retweets” on Twitter, etc.)

I think about the number of people I know who draw at least part of their self-worth off of the number of friends they have on Facebook. The number of times people hit the “heart” button on an Instagram pic. The number of retweets and likes a pithy phrase gets on Twitter or the amount of views on a YouTube video. Especially young people. But it’s not just social media. I think of the number of pastors I know who draw their self-worth off the number of people who show up on a weekend for worship. I think of the drive there is in most churches for numerical growth. I know some pastors who seem to live or die based on whether they make OutReach Magazine’s Top 100 list every year. I think of the uncritical assumptions too many Christians make that larger churches must be doing something “right” and smaller churches must be doing something “wrong.” Or the reverse. I think of the number of folks I know who criticize large churches simply because they’re large. I once belonged to a denomination where the salaries of all the pastors in each region were published and voted on each year. I remember one older man who came from a very small church standing up to rail against large church pastors whose salaries were more than his entire church’s budget. Never mind the differences in scale or complexities of the job. He just didn’t like big churches and made his opinions known.

Why are we so obsessed with numbers? It does seem to be an American phenomenon. I travel the world fairly regularly. I’ve been to China, South Korea, Mexico, Ethiopia, etc. I’ve interacted with pastors from all around the world in lots of different settings. In my experience, they just don’t seem as hung up as we are on numbers. That isn’t to say they ignore them. They pay attention. They evaluate. They are wise and discerning. But there isn’t the emotional attachment American Christians, and especially American pastors – seem to have with attendance, buildings, and budgets. It’s like we get a dopamine “high” every time the sanctuary’s full.

It’s why I find this story about David in 2 Samuel 24/1 Chronicles 21 so convicting. David wants to number his people. He wants to know the size of his army. He wants to measure his power. His influence. His accomplishments. He wants to feel secure. Safe. In control. The images I have in my head are of third-world despots throwing military parades to show off their strength. David is clearly feeling insecure and in that moment, Satan strikes. He comes along and tempts David according to 1 Chronicles 21 and God allows it to happen according to 2 Samuel 24. The results are tragic. "Thus says the Lord, 'Choose what you will: either three years of famine, or three months of devastation by your foes while the sword of your enemies overtakes you, or else three days of the sword of the Lord, pestilence on the land, with the angel of the Lord destroying throughout all the territory of Israel.' Now decide what answer I shall return to him who sent me." (1 Chronicles 21:11-12) God is going to teach David a lesson in humility. He is going to teach David where to find his true strength. He is going to teach David where true security lies. In God alone.

70,000 die from the plague. This is horrific and we cannot understand why God would do such a thing. At the same time, we have to remember that such events take place at the mysterious intersection of God's will and human freedom. David's decision has consequences and because David is king, the consequences impact his people. The same is true even for today. The decisions our politicians make impact real people in real life and can cause real pain and suffering. David decides to number his fighting men and around the same time, a plague begins. It is brutal. Virulent. And it kills. Somewhere in David's mind. In the prophet Gad's mind. Probably in Joab's mind and the minds of so many others, these events are related. The plague is perceived as God's punishment on Israel for David's sinful choices. And perhaps it is. We cannot dismiss the possibility out of hand for God's ways are not our ways and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. He has clearly told His people over and over again that there are consequences...real, life-threatening consequences...for sin. God's justice and righteousness will not be mocked.

So how do I respond? What does this mean for my life? First and foremost, it leads me to confession. Repentance. It calls to mind all the times I too have placed my faith in numbers. Or my mental health and well-being in the number of likes I get from social media. I am not immune. So I confess my sin before God. Second, it leads me to the cross. To the place where the penalty for my sin was paid. To the place where God's judgment was fully and completely and utterly satisfied by the death of my Lord. I am not condemned. I need not feel shame. For God has done for me what I could not. Third, it inspires me to live for Him today. To live from that place of grace knowing God has torn down the dividing wall of hostility that exists between us and made peace with me by the blood of His Cross. I am forgiven so I can forgive others. Grace was extended to me so I can extend it to others. Love was shown to me so I can show love to others. I can rest secure in God's hands.

May 16, 2018
PEAKS AND VALLEYS

Readings for the day: Psalms 108, 109

One of the things I love to do is climb mountains. In Colorado, we have over 50 mountains that top out at over 14,000 feet. Standing on top of Bierstadt, Longs, Pikes, Antero, Quandry, Grays, Lincoln, Democrat, etc. makes one feel like they are on top of the world. But the journey to get to the top can be brutal. I remember the first time I tried to climb Pikes Peak from the trailhead. 26 miles round trip. We got 12 miles in. One mile from the summit. Clouds started rolling in. We had to turn back. I've never been more frustrated. I remember when I was a kid and my dad took us to climb Longs. 16 miles round trip. A hard and treacherous hike. I was 12. My brothers were 10 and 8 respectively. We were supposed to get up at about 1AM to get on the trail. I've never prayed so hard in my life! (That dad's alarm wouldn't go off...ha!)

The spiritual life is a lot like climbing mountains. There are peaks and valleys. Despair and exhilaration. Struggle and success. Defeat and victory. That's what I think of when I read today's Psalms. David is exuberant in his praise in Psalm 108. "My heart is steadfast, O God! I will sing and make melody with all my being! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn! I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations. For your steadfast love is great above the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the clouds. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!" (Psalms 108:1-5) God is good. God is glorious. To serve Him is to experience blessing and salvation. And then, in almost the same breath it seems, David cries out in anguish. Calling curses down on his enemies. "Be not silent, O God of my praise! For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me, speaking against me with lying tongues. They encircle me with words of hate, and attack me without cause...May his days be few; may another take his office! May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow! May his children wander about and beg, seeking food far from the ruins they inhabit! May the creditor seize all that he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil!" (Psalms 109:1-3, 8-11) It's a brutal Psalm. Painful to read. David is raw in his desire for vengeance.

It's easy to dismiss one and embrace the other. Easy to dismiss David's anger and rage while embracing his love and grace and mercy. It's easy to try to separate ourselves from David. Differentiate. But then we read this from Jeremiah, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9) Or this from Jesus, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander." (Matthew 15:19) We remember what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that to even look at another person with lustful intent makes one guilty of adultery. To harbor anger in one's heart makes one guilty of murder. Clearly, we cannot trust what's in our hearts.

Many years ago, I was falsely accused. I was attacked personally and professionally. I had an experience where another person tried everything they could to ruin me and my family. They questioned my integrity. They questioned my character. They even questioned my faith. I've never been more angry in my life. It was the first time I truly felt I had an enemy. And I am ashamed to admit, deep down in my heart. In dark places I don't like to acknowledge exist, I prayed for this man's destruction. I prayed for God to take him out of my life. And I found myself identifying strongly with David in his anger, rage, and pain. I also found God meeting me in those dark places and leading me back to the light. Teaching me that I am capable of great evil just as I am capable of great good. And the only thing that keeps me from becoming an angry, vengeful man is the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ.

May 17, 2018
LEAVING A LEGACY

Readings for the day: 1 Chronicles 23, 24, 25, 26

“When David was old and full of days, he made Solomon his son king over Israel.” (1 Chronicles 23:1)

Legacy. It’s something all of us will leave. To our children. To our grandchildren. To those we work with. To those we serve. Over the past several years, I’ve served my denomination as the chair of our Ministerial Committee. In that position, I had the privilege of walking alongside several pastors as they made the transition into retirement. It wasn’t always easy. Some of those transitions were smooth. Some were rocky. Some were planned. Some were unplanned. Some felt affirmed on their way out. Others felt pushed out by the people they loved. My biggest takeaway? We either plan for the day when we will no longer be around or someone else will plan it for us.

David made plans. He understood with all his wisdom and experience that he could set his successor, Solomon, up for success. So he organizes the Levites. Helps them transition from service to the Tabernacle to service in the Temple. Gives them new roles and responsibilities that fit the new situation they will find themselves in. He organizes the priests. Casts lots so they can be established in their terms of service. He sets up the musicians in their service. And then the gatekeepers, treasurers, and other officials. It is a massive undertaking. A complete reorganization from top to bottom of the entire leadership structure of a nation. Imagine would might have happened had David left this to Solomon to figure out? Imagine the infighting. The jockeying for position. The currying for favor. Imagine the chaos that might have resulted as the sons of Eleazar fought with the sons of Ithamar for the power of the priesthood. Imagine the sons of Levi, set free from their obligations to carry and care for the Tabernacle, refusing to care for the sacred elements of the Lord. Imagine the gatekeepers and musicians each deciding to do their own thing. Solomon would have had a mess on his hands for sure!

But David was faithful. He knew a significant part of his role was to finish well. To pass on a strong legacy to his son. Not just for Solomon’s sake but for the sake of Israel as a nation. Because of my experience walking alongside so many pastors, my wife and I talk a lot about our legacy. Though I am still young, the years pass by so quickly. How am I preparing to pass on what has been entrusted to me? Should the Lord tarry and give me a rich and full life on this earth, I might have twenty-five good years of pastoring left. What will those years look like? How will I spend them? When will I know it is time to raise up my successor? How can I set them up for success? My children are beginning to leave home and head off to college. What kind of spiritual legacy have I given them? How have I prepared them to take on the roles and responsibilities of an adult? My parents are getting older and will begin to face the challenges that come along with aging. Am I prepared to care for them? Assist them? Make sure they continue to live a rich and full and vital life alongside their grandkids? These are important questions to ask and ponder and pray over no matter what season of life you find yourself in.

May 18, 2018

THE GREATNESS OF GOD

Readings for the day: Psalms 131, 138, 139, 143, 144, 145

Reading through the Psalms this morning was refreshing. Especially the final reading from Psalm 145. One cannot meditate on these words enough. One cannot hear these words enough. "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable." God is truly great. Greater than we can imagine. Greater than we think we know. Limitless in his power and knowledge. Limitless in his love and grace. Limitless in his righteousness and justice. His greatness is simply so great it is unsearchable. It is mysterious. Unfathomable. His will is inscrutable. We will never truly understand the mind of God because we are finite. We see through a glass darkly. We only can see part of the picture. We have such a limited view. But God's greatness knows no end! God's greatness knows no boundaries!

"The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all and his mercy is over all that he has made." Echoes of Exodus where God showed Himself to Moses. The true nature and character of God revealed in all its fullness and glory. God is gracious. His love is unconditional. His mercy is everlasting. There is nothing that can separate us from God's love. Nothing that can condemn those who are in Christ Jesus. No conditions. No circumstances. No sinful behavior. No addiction. No crisis. No tragedy. No doubt. No fear. No failure. Nothing in all of creation can separate those who are in Christ Jesus from the gracious, merciful, steadfast love of God. This is why "all your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord!"

"The Lord is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works." His Law is beautiful. Precious. It is like water to the soul. His commands are designed for human flourishing. His statutes are for our protection. All his ways are good and kind.

"The Lord is near to all who call on Him...He fulfills the desire of those who fear Him...the Lord preserves all who love Him..." O the wonderful promises of God! They are true! They are secure! They are more real to me than my thoughts. My feelings. My experience. They are the foundation of my life in Christ. Truly God fulfills His promises. Always in His way and in His time and according to His good plan.

I love the Psalms so much sometimes I just sit and let the words wash over me like waves at the seashore. Wave after wave of God's goodness. Wave after wave of God's promises. Wave after wave of God's glory. As I am drenched in the love and grace of God, I find myself quite naturally falling to my knees in praise. Falling to my knees in humble submission. Falling to my knees is thanksgiving for all He has done for me.

May 19, 2018
GENEROSITY

Readings for the day: 2 Chronicles 27, 28, 29, and Psalm 68

“God loves a cheerful giver.” (2 Cor. 9:7) God loves it when His people give generously out of the bounty He has entrusted to them. God has given us all we need to take care of every single human need in the world today. According to the New York Times, it would take 10 billion dollars a year to provide clean drinking water to the world. Sounds like a lot, doesn’t it? It’s 1/10 of what Europe spends on alcohol each year and about half of what the US spends on dog food. According to the UN, it would take about 30 billion a year to solve the world’s food crisis. According to the WHO, it would cost \$58/person to provide everyone with access to basic healthcare. About 371 billion by 2030. The impact? 97 million premature deaths could be averted, including more than 50 million children who never live to see their 5th birthday. 20 million deaths from non-communicable diseases like diabetes, cancer, and heart disease would be prevented. Life expectancy would jump anywhere between 3-9 years. Incredible!

How do we get from here to there? How does one become a generous person? The kind of giver God loves? King David shows us the way. First and foremost, one must love God supremely. We must love God more than our wealth. More than our lifestyles. More than our safety. More than our comfort. We must love God with our whole hearts. Listen to what David tells his son Solomon. “And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will cast you off forever.” (1 Chronicles 28:9) Essentially, the key to Solomon’s success. The key to his kingship will be his love for God.

Second, we must recognize God is the giver of all good gifts. “Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name.” (1 Chronicles 29:10-13) We don’t own a single thing. Everything we have comes from God’s own hands. He chose the place of our birth. He endowed us with gifts and talents and abilities. He sovereignly orchestrated the opportunities we’ve been given. All these things were outside our control and yet they are the secret to our success. Of course we work hard. Of course we do our best. We are not passive in this process. But the foundation of whatever success we’ve achieved in this life was not laid by our own hands but by God Himself.

Third, we must acknowledge we are unworthy of such divine attention. “But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding.” (1 Chronicles 29:14-15) The world is constantly telling us we “deserve” all we have. We’ve “earned” all we’ve received. We are “good” and “righteous” and “worth” every penny of our wealth. The Bible calls this a lie. We are unworthy sinners. Unworthy of God’s attention. Unworthy to come into His presence. We are sinners in desperate, desperate, desperate need of grace. Our days are like a shadow. There is no abiding. In a generation or two, all we have accomplished will be dust and no one will even remember our names. But God loves us. And has dealt bountifully with us. And has secured for us an eternal home in the heavens if we will receive His greatest gift. Jesus.

Fourth, once we’ve set our hearts on Christ. Once we’ve acknowledged God as the “sole proprietor” of this world and all that is in it. Once we’ve humbled ourselves in our unworthiness before Him. Our hearts and hands

quite naturally open. Our fists unclench. Our fears and doubts fade. And we give. Give generously. Freely. Cheerfully. "I know, my God, that you test the heart and have pleasure in uprightness. In the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you. O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you." (1 Chronicles 29:17-18)

When it comes to your money...is your heart directed towards God? Or does He get what's left over? When it comes to your wealth...do you see it as a tool in God's hand to do His work? Or do you misuse the gifts of God to provide a safe and comfortable lifestyle for yourself? As a church...are we seeking to feather our own nest or are we continually seeking to give more and more of what God has given us away? (For the record, I am thankful to serve a church who not only gives more than 20% of it's income away but has committed to raising that by 1% a year indefinitely.) As a nation...a Christian nation...are we committed to lead the world in generosity by caring for the less fortunate? Those trapped in cycles of life-threatening poverty? Are we willing to be "strong and courageous", sacrificing our own needs, wants, and desires so the world can have clean water, nutritious food, and basic healthcare? The reality is America could probably fund these initiatives ourselves both domestically and internationally if we tap faith-based networks that are already doing so much of the local work. When you pray...do you ask God to keep His "purposes and thoughts" in your heart so you will grow in generosity as a disciple of Jesus?

May 21, 2018
PERSONAL GOD

Readings for the day: Psalms 111-118

Christians believe in a personal God. Not a private god. Not a cosmic butler. Not a divine ATM machine. But a God who is personal, present, and who fulfills His promises. Today's reading is a good one. In so many of the Psalms, God reveals His heart to us. He is a God who is with us. He is a God who is for us. He is a God who is at work in us. He will never leave our side. He will never let us go. He will never give up on us.

"The Lord is gracious and merciful. He provides food for those who fear him; he remembers his covenant forever...He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name!" (Psalms 111:4-5, 9) God's covenant with us in no way depends on us! What a glorious truth! It is completely and utterly dependent on the steadfast, faithful, fiercely loyal love of God!

"The Lord is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens! Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people. He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord!" (Psalms 113:4-9) The Lord is especially tender towards those in great need. The poor. The needy. The barren. The hurting. The struggling. The depressed. The anxious. The lonely. God sees you! God looks down on your broken condition and He is at work to raise you up! There is nothing hidden from God. No secret pain or heartache. No injustice. No unrighteousness. The Lord sees it all and He will set all things right!

"I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live." (Psalms 116:1-2) God hears every cry. God sees every tear. God knows every anxious thought. God feels all our pain. And He inclines His ear towards us. He doesn't force us to come to His level. Doesn't require us to ascend the heavens to gain an audience with Him. He inclines. He descends. He listens closely. Intently. He gathers His beloved into His arms and leans in to make sure He hears every word. Every thought. Every prayer.

By the time you get to Psalm 118, it's like the Psalmist can't help himself. The words tumble over each other. Promise after promise. Declaration after declaration. So much to praise God for! So much to thank God for! One of the best ways to read the Psalms is back to back to back and let the words wash over you. Let them fill you. Let them give you confidence today. Let them give you strength.

The Lord is on my side.

The Lord is my helper.

The Lord is my strength.

The Lord is my song.

The Lord is my salvation.

Claim these promises as your own today. Let them guide you through each and every challenge. Each and every crisis. Each and every circumstance of your life.

May 22, 2018
THE GODFATHER

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 1-2 and Psalms 37, 71, 94

Today I pictured Michael Corleone at the altar taking the baptismal vows as his henchmen settled score after score after score. Carlo. Tessio. Virgil Solozzo. Tattaglia. Cuneo. Stacci. Barzini. ("But I didn't know until this day, that it was Barzini all along.") At the end of David's life, there is yet another struggle for power. His son, Adonijah, sees his opportunity to take the throne. He gathers some of David's inner circle around him. He sacrifices sheep and oxen. He calls all the leaders of the nation to join him with a few notable exceptions. But he miscalculates. He moves too soon. David is not yet dead. The timing is not right. And the results are disastrous.

Solomon is crowned king by David at the acclaim of all the people. But David's not quite finished settling scores. He has a long memory. He knows who has wronged him. He knows who has betrayed him. And one gets the sense that he's been waiting. Biding his time. Getting ready for the right moment to strike. Joab. Shimei. Abiathar. Adonijah. All fall to the sword or are exiled as Solomon works to secure his throne. This is real life in the real world and whereas we may not assassinate our political enemies anymore, we certainly do all we can to discredit them and "assassinate" their character. Things haven't much changed since Solomon's time.

What do we take away from today's reading? Well, the biblical authors make it clear that God is using broken, imperfect people to bring about His righteous judgment. Joab is executed for committing the cold-blooded murders of Abner and Amasa. Shimei is executed for the curse he put on David as he fled for his life. Abiathar is exiled for his treason, thus fulfilling a decades old prophecy about Eli's family being expelled from service at the house of God. Adonijah is executed for his treason and sedition. Though it may make our modern sensibilities squirm, God's righteous judgment is a critical component of His eternal character.

A God without justice is a God who is powerless in the face of evil. A God without justice is soft and sentimental. A God without justice cannot stand against the violence and tyranny of this world. A God without justice is weak. But God is a God of justice. And He executes His righteous judgment on sin and evil in this world! This is why the Psalmist can declare, "Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers!...For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land...The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him, but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming...For the arms of the wicked shall be broken, but the Lord upholds the righteous....But the wicked will perish; the enemies of the Lord are like the glory of the pastures; they vanish—like smoke they vanish away." (Psalms 37:1, 9, 12-13, 17, 20) Though it may not happen in this life, the promise of God is sure! Evil will get its due! Evildoers will not inherit the Kingdom! Satan and his demonic horde will eventually be bound and thrown into the lake of fire! God will make His victory complete! His justice will reign upon the earth!

Until that great day comes, what to make this reading in our own lives? God is a God of justice. He sees our sin. He sees the evil we commit not just with our hands but in our hearts and minds as well. Our evil thoughts. Our evil intentions. Our sinful and selfish ways. Sins of commission and sins of omission. We cannot escape the justice of God! And this should bring us to our knees in worship before the Crucified and Risen Christ who literally stood in our place. Took our punishment. Bore the wrath we deserved. Satisfied God's justice once and for all! Thanks be to God for what He has done!

May 23, 2018
IF YOU LOVE ME...

Readings for the day: Psalm 119:1-88

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments." (John 14:15) Jesus' words. Simple. Plain. True. Not if you want to earn my love, keep my commandments. Not if you want to be good enough for my love, keep my commandments. Not if you want to be worthy of my love, keep my commandments. Simply, "if you love me, keep my commandments." The reality is we cannot love Jesus and reject His commandments. We cannot love Jesus and reject His ways. We cannot love Jesus and reject the Law of God in our lives.

The other day I took my car into the shop. It keeps dying at random times like at stoplights and intersections. Not good! So they hooked it up to a diagnostic machine to see if they could determine the problem. The Law of God operates in much the same way. It serves as a diagnostic for what's truly going on in our hearts. When we read God's Word, do we find ourselves naturally wanting to obey? Do we find ourselves aspiring to be more than we are? Do we experience the conviction of the Holy Spirit and a deep humbling in our hearts for how far we have fallen short? Do we repent? Do we experience regret? A godly sorrow? Or do we avoid God's Law? Do we reject God's Law? Do we find ourselves dismissing God's Law as antiquated? Irrelevant? Impossible?

We don't know for sure who penned the words of Psalm 119 but there is a tradition that tells us David wrote this Psalm in order to teach Solomon the "ABC's" of the spiritual life. (The Psalm is arranged in stanzas according to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet.) David, as we know, was a "man after God's own heart." Why? Certainly, it had nothing to do with his behavior. Over and over again, David proved himself to be the chief of sinners. Just like you. Just like me. No, what set David apart was his great love for God's Law. Despite his crimes. Despite his mistakes. Despite his failures. David never stopped loving God's commands. Never stopped aspiring to them. Never stopped seeking to follow them all the days of his life. David's love for the statutes, testimonies, and rules is expressed over and over again in this particular Psalm.

"Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart..."

"With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments!"

"In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches..."

"I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word..."

"My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times..."

"Your testimonies are my delight; they are my counselors..."

"I will run in the way of your commandments when you enlarge my heart!"

(Psalms 119:2, 10, 14, 16, 20, 24, 32)

Many Christians today claim to love Jesus and yet reject His commandments. They claim to love God and yet reject His Truth and His Way. They believe God's laws are culturally bound and therefore useless in today's world. They argue that God's laws are biased, privileged, and misogynistic. They argue God's laws are too patriarchal and hierarchical and tyrannical. So they reject God's Law. They reject God's commands. They reject God's ways. But this is pure hypocrisy. One cannot love God and NOT love His commands. Jesus doesn't leave us that option. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

Now it's important to remember to distinguish between the ceremonial laws governing the worship life of ancient Israel. The civil laws governing the national life of ancient Israel. And the moral law which is timeless and eternal. Laws forbidding the eating of shrimp are NOT the same as laws governing sexual immorality. Laws forbidding the mixing of two fibers in clothing are NOT the same as laws governing violence and murder. David is addressing the moral law in Psalm 119 as is Jesus in John 14:15. These laws were put in place to teach us how to follow God faithfully. To live a godly and blameless life before Him. They were put in place to convict us when we fall short and instruct us when we seek wisdom.

So do you follow David's advice? Do you meditate on God's law? Day and night? Do you love God's commands? Believe they are what's best for your life?

May 24, 2018
WHAT WOULD YOU ASK FOR?

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 3-4, 2 Chronicles 1, Psalms 72

"At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, "Ask what I shall give you." (1 Kings 3:5)

Put yourself in Solomon's shoes as you read today. You have a glorious vision of God. He literally bends the heavens to come down and enter your dreams as you sleep. He says to you, "What shall I give to you?" "What is it you want?" "Tell me your heart's desire and I will make it happen." What would you say? How would you respond? What would you ask for?

Take a moment. Don't let yourself respond too quickly. Let the Spirit search your heart as you ponder and reflect. What would you ask for? As you think, let me encourage you to get in touch with your deepest fears. We all have them. Secret fears we harbor in our hearts that we spend a lifetime running from or protecting ourselves from. So much of how we choose to live our lives is in response to primordial fears we all carry inside. Fear of failure. Fear of not having enough. Fear of being unsafe. Fears for our children or our children's children. Fear of insignificance. Fear of disease. Fear of death. What do you think Solomon was afraid of? As a young man, he had just inherited a powerful kingdom in the Middle East. (Not the safest or calmest place in the world, especially back then!) He was surrounded by powerful neighbors with powerful armies. He faced enemies both at home and abroad. As fabulous as his wealth was, it was fleeting in the ancient world. It could be here today and gone tomorrow. There was no FCC to guarantee his money. His people were looking to him for guidance and wisdom. What if he failed? What if he couldn't live up to his father's incredible legacy? All eyes turned to him as he ascended the throne. Would he be able to hold it? Would he preside over a period of peace and prosperity or would the nation crumble under his leadership? What if famines struck? What if the rains didn't come? What if harvests failed? Plagues struck his livestock? So much responsibility at such a young age!

I imagine Solomon's dreams were often filled with anxiety and fear. The pressure to perform had to be enormous. So when the Lord came to him with this question - "What shall I give to you?" - Solomon responds from the depths of his heart. "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?" (1 Kings 3:9) Centuries later, a man named James would encourage God's people to pray a similar prayer. "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him." (James 1:5) It's a potent prayer. Transcending time and place and circumstance. Solomon is clearly not simply focused on the present or even the short-term. He knows the challenges he will face. He knows the years will weigh heavy. He knows there will be trials and tribulations and struggles and heartache. He knows all of this and so he asks for divine wisdom to make good decisions for the sake of God's people. How selfless! How humble! How insightful!

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus teaches His disciples, saying, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." (Matthew 7:7) Isn't that amazing? Essentially, Jesus is asking his disciples the same question He once asked Solomon. What is it you want? Ask and I will give it to you! Seek it out and I will show it to you! Be persistent in prayer and I will open the door for you. I will let you into my presence. I will answer all your questions. I will meet all your needs. I will give you what your heart desires.

Wait a minute, you say! That cannot be true! We've all prayed lots of prayers that were never answered! We've all prayed lots of prayers that just seemed to bounce off the ceiling! We've all prayed lots of prayers and gotten the silent treatment - so we thought - from the Lord. So what's really going on here? What's Jesus really saying?

Jesus is no genie. We are not Aladdin with a magic lamp. Expressing to God our deepest desires and deepest needs is not the same as making three wishes! God probes the deepest recesses of our hearts. Psalm 42:7 describes it like this, "Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me." The Apostle Paul says it like this in Romans 8:26-27, "For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." This is why Paul can say with confidence that God works all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose! Because God responds to the deepest needs of the human heart. The needs we can't give voice to. The needs we don't want to admit to. The needs are most afraid to express.

The most amazing thing about Solomon is that he's in touch with his needs. He knows he is weak. He knows he is young. He knows he is immature. He knows he is unable to carry the burden that has been placed on his shoulders. He acknowledges all of this and his prayer therefore comes from that deep place within as he asks for divine wisdom to bear up under the challenges that will come. Are you in touch with your deepest needs? Have you spent time reflecting on your fears? Have you come face to face with your failure? Do you acknowledge your weakness and insignificance and are you willing to bring those needs before God? This, friends, is prayer. Humble. Heartfelt. Authentic. Real. Honest to goodness prayer. And such prayers God will NEVER dismiss or despise! Thanks be to God!

May 25, 2018

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WISDOM AND FOOLISHNESS

Readings for the day: Psalms 119:89-176

A few years ago I read a book that helped me parse the difference between wisdom and foolishness. Wisdom, according to the author, is when we see the truth and adjust our lives accordingly. Foolishness, on the other hand, is when we demand the truth adjust to our reality. To put it another way, wise people will meet the demands of life while foolish people will demand that life meet their demands. Wise people receive feedback when given, own their own performance, mistakes, and issues and take responsibility without externalizing blame or giving excuses. Foolish people become defensive very quickly when confronted, refuse to own their own shortcomings, and often externalize by blaming those around them. Wise people listen. Fools dismiss or ignore.

Are you a wise person or a fool? How do you know? Well, how do you feel as you read the words from Psalm 119? What happens internally when you consider the demands of God's Law? Are you the kind of person who embraces God's commandments, however imperfectly? Are they your delight? Do you find yourself seeking to bend your life in submission to what God has revealed in His Word? Or are you the kind of person who resists God's laws? Dismisses them? Ignores them? Rationalizes away your sin? When you read or engage God's Word, do you seek to bend it to your will? Your life? Your desires? Are you a wise person or a fool?

The Psalmist is clearly wise...

"I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life..."

"Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day..."

"How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"

"Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way."

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

"Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart."

"The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever."

(Psalms 119:93, 97, 103-105, 111, 160)

The Psalmist loves God's Word. Loves God's Law. Loves God's commands. The Psalmist seeks to do all he can to adjust his life to God's Will. To live his life under God's sovereign rule and authority. He makes no excuses for his sin. He doesn't hide his shortcomings. He faces his failures honestly and transparently. And he seeks God's face.

Sadly, so many in our culture today are fools. Even more tragically, they sit in our pews and attend our worship services. As the Apostle Paul says in Romans 10:2, they have a "zeal for God but not according to knowledge." They love God but not in the way He deserves or demands. Instead, they "do what is right in their own eyes." They bend God's Truth to their reality. They seek to make God's Word null and void either through outright rejection or simple ignorance. They refuse to submit their lives to His will or certain areas of their lives to His will and as a result, they live lives of quiet desperation. They are not evil people. They do not have bad intentions. They simply are misguided. As Paul says in Romans 1, "Although they knew God, they did not honor

him as God or give thanks to him, but became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools..." (Romans 1:21-22)

Let me be the first to say this is me! On some level. At certain seasons. In particular circumstances throughout the course of my life, I have tried to bend God's will to my own. I have tried to rationalize away my sin. I have tried to make twist and turn God's Law to make it fit my life. To no avail. I have thrown myself against the will of God so many times until I finally broke. Finally surrendered. And with that surrender has come wisdom. Not perfection. Wisdom. Self-knowledge. Self-understanding. Seeing myself for who I truly am, warts and all. And learning to trust God's ways above my ways. God's thoughts more than my thoughts. God's will more than my feelings. This is what it means to be wise, friends. The fear of the Lord truly is the beginning of wisdom!

May 26, 2018
SEX AND GOD

Readings for the day: Song of Solomon 1-5:1

The Song of Solomon is one of the most difficult and least understood books in all of Scripture. It's one we tend to avoid in our sex-saturated culture. The language is far too intimate. The imagery too graphic. We won't let us picture it much less reflect on how the Spirit might speak to us through it. We flip through the pages as fast as we can to get to the end so we can avoid any embarrassment.

But what is the book about? The love for a man and a woman? The love of God for His church? Perhaps both? Are we comfortable thinking about our relationship with God in sexual terms? Or is that a bridge too far? I firmly believe the Bible is inviting us to approach God in the most intimate of ways. The language of the Song is meant to arouse. Meant to touch the deepest places of our hearts. Meant to draw us into intimate embrace with the Father.

Our inability to embrace this book only reveals how corrupt our understanding of human sexuality has become. We see it as dirty yet pleasurable. Something to be enjoyed and yet something to be feared. Our culture boasts of sexual freedom and yet is shocked when such unfettered freedom leads to abuse and violence. If there's anything the #MeToo movement has taught us is that our sexual appetites are almost impossible to satisfy. Sexuality without restraint is actually destructive and traumatic.

And yet, sex is God's creation. Sexuality is something He instilled within each of us. We are created as sexual beings and when the Bible talks about "knowing" another person, it often uses the most sexually intimate of terms. The same is true for "knowing" God. God designed sex to be the ultimate experience of "knowing." A way for us to express our deepest affections. Our deepest emotions. Our deepest vulnerabilities. All within the safety of the covenant bonds of marriage between a man and a woman. All within the safety of the covenant bond we share with Jesus.

So is it possible to see the Song of Solomon as a prayer? As a way to express the deepest desires of our hearts to God? As a way for us to ask for deeper intimacy with Him? Or does our broken human experience of sexuality warp our thinking? Corrupt how we understand this most powerful and primal of drives? Does it poison this well and thus prevent us from fully grasping the depth of relationship God desires to have with us? There's a reason Christ calls the church His "bride." There's a reason God so often refers to Himself in the Old Testament as a "husband" and Israel as his "wife." Marriage is the place where a man and a woman become "one flesh" before the Lord and it is designed to point beyond itself to something even greater...the "oneness" God desires to have with His people for all eternity.

May 28, 2018

LOVE AS STRONG AS DEATH

Readings for the day: Song of Solomon 5:2-16, 6-8, and Psalms 45

“Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised.” (The Song of Solomon 8:6-7)

I will admit I am partial to these verses. My wife inscribed them on my wedding ring. We’ve been together almost twenty-five years at this point and I can honestly say these words ring true now more than ever. Now life has not been a fairy tale. It’s been hard. We’ve weathered some storms. The loss of a child. The failure of a ministry. The dangerously premature birth of our twins. Our children have struggled and battled and fought many battles. Kristi and I have not always been the best parents. We certainly have not always treated each other well. In fact, I almost lost her several years ago due to my workaholicism and neglect. So we’ve had our ups and downs. But what we’ve learned through it all is that many waters cannot quench love. Many floods cannot drown it. Not if it’s founded on the love God has for us.

As I mentioned in my last devotional, the Song of Solomon is not simply a human love poem. Traditionally it has been interpreted as describing the love God has for His people. It is God who sets us as a seal on His heart. It is God who sets us as a seal on His arm. It is God’s love that is as strong as death. His love that is as fierce as the grave. When the devil offered Jesus the entire world in exchange for love, Jesus utterly despised him. God’s love is eternal. Steadfast. Loyal. True. It is the one sure thing in this uncertain world in which we live.

Ponder the love of God today, friends. A love that will not let you go. A love that will relentlessly pursue you until the day you die. A love that was demonstrated on the Cross. A love that defeated the grave. A love that lives even now eternal in the heavens. A love that is being poured out continually by the Holy Spirit onto God’s people so they will share it with the world. This love is available to us! This love never runs dry! Trusting in this love will save your marriage! It will transform your family! It will deepen your friendships! It will change everything. If you let it. If you will simply let Christ reign and rule in your heart. Rest in this love, friends. Let God quiet you with His love. May you walk today in His love and may you experience the blessing that comes from abiding in His love.

May 29, 2018
THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

Readings for the day: Proverbs 1-4

The world suffers because it lacks wisdom. It lacks understanding. Everyone does what is right in their own eyes. No one takes responsibility. There is always someone else to blame. We live in a world where it is hard for people to accept instruction. Hard for people to humble themselves and receive correction. We resort to yelling and screaming and pouting far too easily. We are a fragile and foolish people.

The world suffers for lack of wisdom. The world is full of challenges. Monumental tasks that cannot be solved by human effort. Cannot be solved by human ingenuity and intellect. The reality is we are not rational creatures. We are far more driven by emotion than we like to admit. Far more inclined to selfishness and greed and hatred than we like to admit. Far more susceptible to temptation than we like to admit. And the resulting corruption destroys any chance we may have at making the world a better place.

What this world needs is wisdom. What we all need is wisdom. And Solomon tells us if we want wisdom, there's only one place to go. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." (Proverbs 3:5-6) God is the fount of all wisdom and understanding. It is God who sees the deep things of this world. God who makes sense of the universe and all that is in it. God who creates order out of our chaos. It is God who can guide us through the maze that is human life. It is God who is our light in the darkness. God who is Truth in the midst of all the lies. And if we truly want to make this world a better place. If we truly want to experience the abundant life Jesus promises those who would follow Him, we have to trust God. We have to seek His wisdom above our own. We have to stop pretending we can do this life on our own.

How often do you pray over the decisions you make? How often do you ask God for wisdom when faced with a difficult situation? How often do you go to God's Word and rely on His Truth even it conflicts with how you think or feel? If this never happens, then I submit you are trying to live your life apart from God. You are trying to survive based on your own wisdom and strength. And I am here to tell you, it will eventually fail. God promises to grant wisdom to all who follow Him. All who will submit to Him. All who will surrender to Him. The fear of the Lord is truly the beginning of wisdom.

May 30, 2018
TEMPTATION

Readings for the day: Proverbs 5-8

It begins with a thought. An attraction. A second glance. Something forbidden catches our attention and the enemy is right there. He's a smooth talker. Delighting in leading us astray. We take our eyes off of Jesus. The horizon shrinks to the immediate. We give no thought as to where this leads. We only feel the desire growing within us. If we could take a step back, we know where this leads. Nowhere. A dead end. A battle ensues. A fight within. A struggle between life and death.

When Solomon describes the temptress, he's not just talking about sex. He's describing in great detail what takes place within the heart of every human being as they wrestle with sin. Our battle with sin is not rational. It doesn't take place in the mind so much as in the heart. The seat of our desires. And it is extremely difficult to resist. It's why Solomon encourages his son to stay as far away as possible. To avoid any situation where temptation may arise. "Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house..." (Prov. 5:8) Instead, he encourages him to focus on what he already has. What God has already given him. "Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well." (Prov. 5:15)

Unfortunately, we do not take Solomon's words to heart. We believe we can fly close to the sun. We believe we can walk right up to the edge without going over. "Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched?" (Prov. 6:27-28) Over and over again, I see this happen. Not just in my life but in the lives of so many I love and serve as pastor. Mistakes are made. Betrayals. Brokenness. And every time we talk it through. Trace it back. Untangle the mess. It begins with this attitude that we are somehow much stronger than we think. And that's why Solomon says, "He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is led astray." (Prov. 5:23)

Resisting sin is part and parcel of the Christian life. The ancients called it the "mortification of the flesh." Paul talks about putting to death his fleshly desires. What does this look like in your life? And do you resist in faith or in your own strength? Friends, we cannot white-knuckle our sobriety. The only way to defeat temptation is to look to Christ. To focus all our attention and all our love and all our devotion on Him. When His love fills our hearts, there is no room for anything else.

May 31, 2018

INTEGRITY

Readings for the day: Proverbs 9-12

“Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad.” (Prov. 12:25)

I know so many who struggle with crippling anxiety. They are young. They are old. They are men. They are women. They come from all different backgrounds. No one is immune. Many studies have been done attempting to pinpoint the source but the reality is there are a multiplicity of factors involved. Isolation. Despite tools like social media, people feel more disconnected than ever. Fewer and fewer report having a good friend. Someone they can call at 2AM if they have a need. This feeling of isolation leads to busyness as people fill up their schedules with all kinds of activities, longing to connect. But the opposite happens. The busier we become, the harder it is for us to connect and the more isolated we feel. Add to this all the stress we carry from our jobs, families, health, finances, etc. It's actually not hard to see why we are so anxious.

Anxiety in a person's heart does indeed weight them down. Saps them of their strength. Wears them out. Impacts their physical health. Their mental acuity. Their emotional stability. It hits every system in the body until we are debilitated. Unable to function on some level. So what's the answer? Walking in integrity. “Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but he who makes his ways crooked will be found out.” (Prov. 10:9) Now, at first blush, that may seem strange. Doesn't integrity have to do with honesty? Are you suggesting if we just tell the truth, we'll all be okay? Certainly that's part of it. But integrity has a deeper meaning as well. Just as buildings have a “structural integrity” so do human beings. Strong lives are built on strong foundations. They are built on strong, godly habits that keep us secure. When we walk in integrity with the Lord, He becomes our stronghold. Our refuge. Our fortress. And we are able to put aside all anxious thoughts. When we make Christ the foundation of our life. When we build our daily lives around godly rhythms. Christ promises we will experience a peace that passes all understanding.

So what are those godly rhythms? What does it mean to live with integrity before the Lord? It starts with humility. Humble submission to Christ. Surrendering to His Lordship over our lives. On this foundation, we layer daily prayer and reflection in the Scriptures. We layer in weekly worship with our church family. We layer in regular intentional time with a few Christian friends. It could be a mentor. A Bible study. A small group. And finally, we look for a place to serve our Lord. To give ourselves away for the sake of His Kingdom. These four spiritual practices become the four walls of a spiritual house that is strong and firm and secure because it is built in the Lord.