

# **BIBLE IN A YEAR**

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

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English Standard Version**

**2018**

**STUDY AND COMMENTARY**

**BY**

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**FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©**

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June 1, 2018  
**MAKING PLANS**

Readings for the day: Proverbs 13-16

"All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit."

"Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established."

"The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps." (Proverbs 16:2-3, 9)

"Doug, I want you to remember something as you go to Wisconsin. You are not going to plant a church. You are going to get involved in what God is doing. Whatever church comes out of it will simply be a byproduct of you joining the Lord in His work in your city. Don't ever forget this!" Unfortunately, that's exactly what I did. My mentor, Steve Hayner, was trying to keep me from making a massive mistake. He was trying to keep me from putting the cart before the horse. From getting out in front of God. But in my arrogance and pride, I thought I had it figured out. My way was pure in my eyes. How could it get any more pure than planting a church for Jesus? My heart had already put together a plan but I failed to grasp that it would be the Lord who would establish my steps. And when it came time for the Lord to weigh my spirit, I was found wanting.

It is so easy for us to fall into this trap. To "assume" that because we are doing God's work. Because we are engaged in ministry. Because we are taking care of our families. Because we are having success. Because everything we touch turns to gold that somehow God must be pleased. So we keep making plans. We keep dreaming dreams. We keep doing our thing and we forget all about God. We rarely consult Him. We rarely ask Him what He thinks. We rarely bring our plans before the Lord in prayer. Except when things go wrong, of course! When we run into barriers. Roadblocks. Failure. Then we cry out to God. What happened? Why me? What went wrong?

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who labor, labor in vain. Unless the Lord establishes our steps, we will stumble and fall. Unless the Lord has commissioned our work, it will fall apart. Unless the Lord is with us, our ways can never be pure.

There's a wonderful spiritual practice called the daily examen. It is the simple practice of bringing the details of our day before the Lord morning and night. Each morning when we wake up, we take our schedule of activities to God in prayer. We pay close attention to our hearts as we do. What makes us anxious today? What brings us peace? What are we excited about? Why? What causes fear? As we bring those things to God, we ask Him to bring consolation. To lead and guide us. To give us wisdom. And then at the end of each day, we repeat the exercise as we look back. What went well? What was hard? Where did we sense God's abiding presence? Where did He feel absent? Why? What did we learn? It doesn't take that long and yet it can make a huge difference in helping us understand the difference between asking God for His plan or asking God to bless our plan for our lives.

June 2, 2018  
THE POWER OF THE TONGUE

Readings for the day: Proverbs 17-20

"A fool's lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating." (Prov. 18:6)

"A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul." (Prov. 18:7)

"If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame." (Prov. 18:13)

"Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits." (Prov. 18:21)

Normally when I read these verse and the many others like them sprinkled throughout the Scriptures, I think of rash words. Words said in anger. Words said in frustration. Words intended to hurt. Words used as weapons. Words said in ignorance. And I do believe these are exactly the kind of words Solomon is referring to when he writes these verses. However, being in a different cultural context this week has given me fresh eyes to see another layer of meaning.

When I am preparing for one of my trips, I usually will have a few people ask me how I communicate. They ask if the local church planters I train speak English. They do not. They ask me if I have learned to speak Oromo or Amharic. I have not with the exception of a few words here and there. They then ask about the interpreter and how that goes. It isn't always easy. The challenge for the interpreter is not only communicate the words being spoken but the meaning being conveyed as well as the emotion behind the meaning. The best interpreters are able to do all three well but it is a monumental challenge! My friends Markos, Elias, Biniyam, Behailu, and Endashaw are some of the most brilliant linguists I know precisely because they are able to take on this challenge and meet it. They are able to do for me what I cannot do for myself.

The other thing I learn through this process is to confront my sense of privilege. When people asked about the translation process, I used to say, "They don't speak English so I use an interpreter." It's a subtle but important nuance as basically I am saying "they" are lacking because "they" don't speak my language so I must "help" them by getting an interpreter. The better and more humble way to put it would be to say, "I don't speak Amharic or Oromo so I need an interpreter." This puts the focus back on my weakness as a monolingual American.

Both my use of language and my assumption of privilege can make or break a cross-cultural relationship. It's only by the grace of God that my "mouth hasn't invited a beating" on any number of occasions where I was culturally insensitive. And because I teach basic theology, I have marveled that my ignorance of local customs, lingual nuances, etc. doesn't get more in the way. Again, all credit is due to the Holy Spirit as well as to the brilliance of the translators I get to work with when I am overseas.

The key to harnessing the power of the tongue is to bring every thought captive to Christ. To run every thought. Every emotion. Every idea we have through the grid that is Christ and ask ourselves if it honors Him. Chances are high that we are truly seeking to honor Christ with our lips, we will not speak careless words. We will not cling to our cultural privilege. We will not throw gasoline on the fire of a conflict but instead use gentle words to turn away wrath. Positive words to bring hope. Loving words to ward off hate. You see, the power of the tongue works both ways. It can be used for good as much as evil. It can uplift as much as it tears down. In my experience, simply using my words to bless others makes a huge impact. How can you use your words today to bring about the blessing of God in someone's life?

June 4, 2018  
**PRIDE AND HUMILITY**

Readings for the day: Proverbs 21-24

"Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, are sin..."Scoffer" is the name of the arrogant, haughty man who acts with arrogant pride." (Prov. 21:4, 24)

There is no greater sin than pride. Pride lies at the root of all sin. It was pride caused Satan to fall from grace and glory when the heavens were young. It was pride that caused Adam and Eve to reject God's command and go their own way. Cain's pride was wounded so he killed Abel. It was Joseph's pride that got him in trouble with his brothers. In his pride, Moses thought he could deliver Israel without God. Saul, in his pride, refused to make right sacrifices. David's pride caused him to number Israel so he could see how powerful he was. Solomon, in his pride, thought he could worship lots of different gods and still remain faithful to Yahweh. Over and over again in the Scriptures, we see pride creep up in God's people with devastating effect.

Pride is still our greatest sin. Pride makes us think we know best how to live our lives. Pride makes us think we can stand in judgment over God's Word and determine what is relevant. Pride makes us think we are like God, discerning good from evil. But how's that working out? When we look at the world around us, is it not pride that is the root cause of the violence? The suffering? The pain? Is it not the pride of nations that causes them to go to war? Is it not the pride of privilege that causes some to look down on others? Is it not the pride of wealth that causes us to accumulate more and more while others go without? Is it not pride that drives our decision-making on a daily basis? We do what's best for us first without a thought for others. Haughty. Proud. Wicked. Scoffer. Arrogant. These are the labels God uses for us when we fall into this trap.

So what's the answer? Humility. Not thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought. Or less of ourselves than we ought. But simply thinking of ourselves less. When we think of ourselves "less." When we consider others before we consider ourselves. When we have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus who – though He was God – did not consider His prerogatives as God something to hold onto. We begin to become humble. We take on the form of a servant. We begin to look like Jesus. And humility comes with its own reward. "The reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honor and life." (Prov. 22:4) God blesses the humble. God blesses those who put Him first. Who put others first. He grants them His favor and they often find the very things they were chasing so hard after coming into their life. The difference, of course, is that these things no longer have any hold on us because Christ now has the tighter grip.

So are you a humble person? Are you the kind of person who needs compliments? Needs to be told how good you are? Are you the kind of person who hates compliments? Hates it when you are recognized for something you did? Both are signs of pride, friends. Are you the kind of person who receives rebuke? Correction? Critique? Or do you grow resentful and angry? Are you the kind of person who crumbles at the first sign of disapproval? Both are signs of pride, friends. Are you the kind of person who chases achievement? Are you the kind of person who avoids achievement? Both are signs of pride, friends. God wants you to think of yourself less. The truly humble person accepts honor and praise for the things they do well because they recognize God has blessed them. The truly humble person is generous with praise of others. Looks for opportunities to build others up. To spread the praise while taking responsibility for any failures. The truly humble person rejects any attempt of the enemy to make them feel worthless, afraid, or of less value in the eyes of God. A truly humble person is free because they do not live for praise nor in fear of praise. So are you a humble person? Pray for God to show you the way.

June 5, 2018  
**MOUNT MORIAH**

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 5-6, 2 Chronicles 2-3

"Then Solomon began to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the Lord had appeared to David his father, at the place that David had appointed, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite." (2 Chron. 3:1)

Brain's not 100% as I just landed in LA after a long 24 hours of travel that began yesterday at noon and still have one leg to go. Today's thoughts may not be all that profound!:-) However, I love today's passage mainly because of how it ties so many different threads together. Mount Moriah is the Temple Mount. It's the place where Solomon built his Temple. But as Chronicles mentions, it's also the place where David saw the angel of the Lord relent from his destruction of Jerusalem. 1 Chron. 21:16 tells us, "David lifted up his eyes and saw the angel of the Lord standing between earth and heaven..." This is really what temples were all about in the ancient world. They were the places where heaven and earth meet. Where human beings could come before God in a unique way. The Celts called them "thin spaces" and we too seek out these experiences in our own worship.

This isn't the only place Mount Moriah appears in the Scriptures. Moriah is also the place where Abraham went to sacrifice Isaac. And those of you who remember the story from Genesis 22, probably recall it was the angel of the Lord who stayed Abraham's hand. And for those who believe in the rapture and certain strains of end times theology, Moriah is the place where Jesus will return when He comes again.

What to take away from the building of the Temple? First of all, I think it's important to recognize sacred spaces in our lives. Places where God showed up in a powerful way. Bending the heavens to come to earth to perform a miracle or do a mighty work in our lives. Those spaces will hold a special place in our hearts as well they should. Second, we need to remember that we ourselves are now the Temple of the Living God. A walking, talking "Moriah" of sorts due to the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. God has touched down in our lives. He has done something in our hearts. And we need to praise Him continually for the miracle of spiritual rebirth.

June 6, 2018

## THE TEMPLE OF THE LIVING GOD

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 7-8, Psalms 11

The prayer of King Solomon at the dedication of the Temple is one of my favorites in all of Scripture. It's serves as a great model for us as we think about our own prayer life. It begins with an ascription of praise for who God is and a recognition that He is utterly transcendent.

"O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walk before you with all their heart..." (1 Kings 8:23) Solomon acknowledges the greatness of God. His majesty. His glory. His splendor. He is not just one among many gods. He is alone is the true God of the heavens and the earth. He is also a God defined by faithfulness. Eternal loyalty. Steadfast love for His covenant people who are the humble recipients of His blessing. This attitude is truly the starting point of prayer. Prayer must begin with an understanding of who God is and who we are. We are not the same. We are not on the same level. God is the shepherd and we are the sheep. God is the potter and we are the clay. God is the king and we are his servants. Prayer place us in a humble position before the Lord. This is the ONLY posture one can take when they come before God in prayer.

"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O Lord my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day..." (1 Kings 8:27-28) As we come humbly before the Lord, we are assured of His promise to hear us. To listen. To attend to our prayers. God hears every word. Every cry. He sees every tear. He knows the secret thoughts of our hearts and He delights when we bring those before Him openly and honestly. Solomon makes it clear that the Temple's primary purpose is to serve as a house for prayer. A place where Israel can come before God and lay their requests before Him.

God not only listens to our requests, He also hears our confession. Throughout this prayer, Solomon acknowledges the inescapable reality of sin. It is ubiquitous. It is endemic. It is simply part of who we are as God's people. So when a man or woman sins. When God's people sin collectively. Whether against neighbor or friend. Through systems of oppression or abuse. When Israel suffers defeat at the hands of their enemies or the rains are shut up in the heavens or famine strikes the land. In those moments, if Israel will humble themselves and pray and seek God's face, God promises to hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land. He promises to "hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive and act and render to each whose heart you know..." (1 Kings 8:39)

God will do all these things in such a way as to make His name great upon the earth. Even in Solomon's prayer, there is a missional, outward-facing component. "Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far country for your name's sake (for they shall hear of your great name and your mighty hand, and of your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name." (1 Kings 8:41-43) God desires to fill the earth with His glory. Israel is called to serve this very purpose. In the way Israel orders her life and faithfully serves her Lord, she will be a witness to the nations and to all of creation of the steadfast love of God.

You can see why I love this prayer so much! As I said above, it is a great model for us to follow in our own lives as we ponder and reflect on our relationship with God. Because of Christ, Christians have access to the Father in ways Solomon, in all his wisdom, could never have imagined! Because Christ sits at the Father's right hand interceding for us continually, the door is always open. The way to the Holy of Holies always clear. We have a standing invitation to come before our Heavenly Father with the blessed assurance He will always listen. When you pray, pray with this eternal promise firmly fixed in your mind and heart.

June 7, 2018

## REVIVAL

Readings for the day: 2 Chronicles 4-7, Psalms 134, 136

“If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” (2 Chron. 7:14)

Do you pray for revival? Revival in God’s Church? Revival in our nation? Revival in your own heart? For years now, this verse from 2 Chronicles has been lifted up as the model prayer for revival. We look around at our culture today. We look around our nation today. All we see are divisions. The flourishing of hate. Racism rearing its ugly head. Sexual assault and abuse. Violence against women and children. Polarization leading to dehumanization and the demonizing of those who might disagree with us. It’s painful and heartbreakingly to see. Some blame social media. I do not. I believe social media has merely brought transparency to the pervasive evil that was already present.

In the face of all the sin and evil and suffering in our nation, the evangelical church took up this prayer from 2 Chronicles 7:14. We begged God to forgive our sin and heal our land. We begged God for revival and a fresh movement of the Holy Spirit. We begged God for transformation and spiritual renewal. But revival has not come. Our nation continues its plunge into darkness and chaos. So what happened? Did God fail to fulfill His promise? Did He NOT hear from heaven? Why hasn’t healing come?

I believe it’s because we’ve played the Pharisee. As much as we desired God’s forgiveness and healing, we refused to humble ourselves, pray, seek God’s face, and turn from our own wicked ways. Evangelical leaders are failing morally in shocking numbers. Sexual temptation. Greed. Power. Influence. Fame. Fortune. Pastors purchasing private jets. Living in multi-million dollar homes. Sacrificing their commitment to Christ for political influence. Engaging in inappropriate relationships and adulterous affairs. Focusing more on building their brand than the Kingdom of God. It is brutal. Shocking. Heartbreakingly. Hypocritical. We arrogantly assume we can police the moral behavior, thoughts, and attitudes of the general public while at the same time refusing to repent of our own sin. On this point, Jesus is 100% clear. We must take the log out of our own eye before we dare to point out the speck in someone else’s eye. The harsh reality is we have lost all credibility.

So what do we do? We humble ourselves. Before the Lord. Before each other. Before the world. We are broken people. We are sinful people. We have no right to claim any moral high ground. We pray. We ask God to continue His sanctifying work in us. We beg the Holy Spirit to give us eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to understand the mind of Christ. We seek God’s face. We stop believing the world revolves around us. We stop treating God like some on-call, cosmic concierge whose only purpose for existence is to meet our emotional needs. We stop treating worship like a consumer product and instead give God the worship He deserves in the way He demands. And finally, we turn from our wicked ways. We come clean. We confess. We repent. We make ourselves vulnerable and transparent before God, before each other, and before the world. Most importantly, we do these things authentically with no other agenda than to come clean before our Heavenly Father.

Jesus once said, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you.” (Matt. 6:33) Too often we flip things around. Put the cart before the horse. Try to harness God’s Kingdom to advance our own agendas – personal, social, or political. God will have none of it! He will not share His glory! He will not share the limelight! He will not share the credit! He alone is worthy! He alone is Savior! He alone is Lord! He doesn’t need us. He doesn’t need our wealth. He doesn’t need our resources. He doesn’t need our knowledge or talent or ability. He doesn’t need our country. God is the same yesterday, today and forever. Empires rise and fall before Him. He knows the name of each of the billion trillion stars in the heavens. And yes, He hears our prayers. Yes, He will forgive our sin. Yes, He will heal our land. But only if we first relinquish our vain and selfish pride.

June 9, 2018  
THE GREATNESS OF GOD

Readings for the day: Psalms 146-150

I love these final Psalms. They extol the greatness of God. I can imagine all of Israel gathered at the Temple singing them at the top of their lungs. Wave after wave of sound ascending to the heavens. Their hearts on fire. Their passion for God inflamed. Their love for Him crescendoing. Their worship overwhelming the senses. It's a powerful thing to witness.

When I was in Ethiopia last week, I had the privilege of worshiping with a Mekane Jesu church. Pentecostal Lutherans. When they sang, it was a whole body experience. Dancing. Swaying. Clapping. They sang without any sense of self-conscious pride. No insecurities at all. No worries about the number of verses or choruses on repeat. No debates over personal preference. They simply sang from their hearts. Their joy was palpable. They love singing together. They love being together. They love worshiping before the Lord. It was powerful.

Like Israel, they praised the God "who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin." (Psalms 146:7-9) They recounted God's goodness. They praised God's greatness. My interpreter helped me understand each chorus and verse. They sang about God's provision. God's protection. God's miraculous healing. God's deliverance from evil.

Like Israel, they praised the God "determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure...He covers the heavens with clouds; he prepares rain for the earth; he makes grass grow on the hills. He gives to the beasts their food, and to the young ravens that cry...He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes...He sends out his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow and the waters flow." (Psalms 147:4-5, 8-9, 16, 18) It's the rainy season now and they are experiencing the blessing of abundant water flowing, bringing life to their dry land. Flowers are in bloom. Crops are flourishing. Herds increasing. The grasslands rich and full and green.

Like Israel, they know when they praise their God, they are joining their voices with the heavens and the earth. The heavenly host and the saints who have gone before them. They join the great cloud of witnesses around the throne of God to give Him the worship due His Holy Name. "Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts! Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!" (Psalms 148:1-4)

Oh how I hope and pray for the day when we can abandon ourselves to worship in the way Israel once did! Oh how I hope and pray for the day when we can put aside all pretense and pride and self-consciousness and insecurity and consumeristic thoughts and attitudes and worship God like our Ethiopian brothers and sisters! Oh how I long for the day when we would come face to face with our God! See Him for who He is! Worship Him in Spirit and in Truth! Give Him the praise He deserves! The worship He demands! Fall on our faces before His throne, casting all our crowns before Him! Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!

June 11, 2018  
THE TEST OF PRAISE

Readings for the day: Proverbs 27-29

I confess I have a strong need for affirmation. A strong need to be admired. A strong need to be respected. A strong need for praise. It began when I was young. Growing up in a demanding environment where it often felt like my best was never good enough. The bar always just a bit out of reach. I got good grades but not straight A's. I played football and lacrosse at a high level, even made all-state in lacrosse, but the conversations after games tended to center on my mistakes. I made Eagle Scout, thankfully the highest rank one could achieve but was pushed to get there as quick as possible. Looking back, I don't actually blame anyone. Not my parents or grandparents. We are just a high-achieving family. However, there is a darker side to all things and the darker side to this approach to parenting is that I became starved for affirmation.

Solomon seems to believe this is a common condition and he offers advice on how to deal with praise in a godly manner. "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring." (Prov. 27:1) Perhaps another way of saying, "Do not count your chickens before they hatch." Do not assume anything. Do not take anything for granted. Do not fall into the trap of believing tomorrow is guaranteed. Do not fall into the trap of believing life moves from one success to another. There is failure. There is disappointment. There is pain. These are realities one cannot escape. "Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips." (Prov. 21:2) When you achieve something good, do not self-promote. This is incredibly counter-cultural in a social media world where self-promotion is the name of the game. Our self-worth is often rooted in the number of "likes" and "follows" we get on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. We post information to make sure everyone knows what we've done but Solomon encourages us to go the opposite way. To leave the praise to others. Leave the promotion to others. Leave the affirmation to others. Let it rise organically as it will mean so much more. "The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and a man is tested by his praise." (Prov. 27:21) What does the praise of others do to your soul? Does it tap those wells of pride in your heart? Do you find yourself hungering and thirsting for the recognition? Or do you go the opposite way? Do you deflect? Self-deprecate? Refuse to accept honest, heartfelt praise when it is given? Both betray a prideful heart that must be crucified. True humility is learning to accept praise when it is offered. Receiving affirmation for a job well done with a simple, "Thank you."

Another way to determine how good you are at handling praise is to look at how you handle criticism. Are you able to receive critique when it is offered? Are you able to humbly submit to those in authority over your life such as a parent, coach, teacher, employer, etc? When they correct you, do you accept it or resist it? And what about when a peer confronts you? A co-worker or friend? Are you able to receive their rebuke or do you blameshift? React negatively? Push them away? Solomon challenges us to remain humble. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy." (Prov. 27:6) When someone you love plucks up the courage to have the hard conversation with you...listen. They are being faithful. They are demonstrating great love and care and concern for you. Surround yourself with friends who are willing to tell you the truth even when it hurts rather than a bunch of people who only flatter you and tell you how great you are. They do not have your best in mind. "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another." (Prov. 27:17) Bang two pieces of iron together and sparks often fly. Growing as a person is not easy. It requires struggle. Struggle is good. Fighting. Wrestling. Battling oneself is an essential requirement to becoming the person God created us to be. Jesus clearly teaches us that following Him requires death to self. We cannot do this on our own. We need people who will encourage us in this effort. "He who is often reproved, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing." (Prov. 29:1) Resistance only leads to more pain. Take it from me. I've experienced the deep brokenness that comes from refusing to listen to those who had my best in mind. In my pride I thought I knew better. In my arrogance, I believed I had all the answers. And it took my face hitting the pavement for me to learn humility.

Where do you find yourself this morning? Are you able to take a step back and evaluate your life? When was the last time you received a rebuke? Listened to a critique? Humbled yourself before others? And what do you do with praise? When you achieve something, is your first instinct to share it on social media and what are you hoping to gain? What happens in your heart if you don't get a bunch of likes? Look back over the posts you've made over the years, what kind of image are you projecting to the world? Is it real? Or manufactured to garner praise? What steps do you need to take to follow Solomon's advice?

June 12, 2018  
CHASING THE WIND

Readings for the day: Ecclesiastes 1-6

Robin Williams. Kate Spade. Anthony Bourdain. These are the famous faces of suicide. I could name several more from my own community who are not as famous. Kids. Young adults. Men and women in their late fifties and early sixties who feel they have nothing left to live for. According to the CDC, suicide rates have spike 30% in half of the states in the US in the last twenty years. It is now a leading cause of death, ranking tenth on the list. Its causes are manifold. Mental health problems. Relationship issues. Job loss. Financial pressures. Substance abuse. And it often strikes without warning. Colorado has one of the highest suicide rates in the nation and Douglas County, where I live, struggles significantly with this issue. I remember back in 2014, four teenagers in our area taking their own lives in the span of 11 days! And it's unfortunately a rare year when I don't perform the funeral of at least one suicide victim.

"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." (Ecclesiastes 1:2) The writer of Ecclesiastes (traditionally ascribed to Solomon) clearly takes a dim view of life. Work is vanity. Riches are vanity. Pleasure is vanity. Success is vanity. Wisdom is vanity. All is vanity. What do we gain by working so hard? No one remembers us after we're gone. Our wealth is passed on to another to enjoy. The righteous and unrighteous both die and are laid in the grave. All end up as dust. Clearly the Teacher is depressed. He looks around at all he has accomplished in his life and abandons all hope. He finds no meaning in anything he has done or accomplished. All he has to show for all his hard work and toil and pursuit of wisdom is sorrow. Grief. Pain. "For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow." (Ecclesiastes 1:18) "So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind." (Ecclesiastes 2:17) It's not easy to read. It's feels like we're reading the Teacher's personal journal and hearing his inmost thoughts as he grapples with despair. A similar cord is struck when one reads Mother Theresa's journals which were published posthumously.

One of the things I love most about the Bible is its honesty. It is raw. Gut-wrenching at times. It never sugar-coats or glosses over the harsh realities of life. Solomon in all his wisdom struggled with depression. Solomon for all his wealth and power felt inadequate. Solomon for all his success and achievement felt insecure. I imagine everyone can identify with him on some level. No matter how much you achieve. How much you accumulate. How popular you become. It's never enough. It's vanity and a striving after the wind.

So what's the answer? We'll find out when we finish the book tomorrow. After all has been said and done, the Teacher comes to one final, critically important conclusion. "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." (Ecclesiastes 12:13) In fact, some suggest we need to read Ecclesiastes back to front instead of front to back. I disagree. I believe it is important for us to follow the Teacher's example. Grapple with our own darkness and despair. Face our depression and anxiety and fear. Honestly come to grips with the utter hopelessness we have without Christ. What makes Ecclesiastes so powerful even to this day is the way it speaks to our hearts about idolatry. We have a tendency to place our trust in our own wisdom. Our own strength. Our own accomplishments. Our own wealth. Our own toil and hard work. Our pursuit of pleasure. Ecclesiastes exposes these idols as empty and meaningless which, in turn, points us back to God.

June 13, 2018  
ENJOY LIFE

Readings for the day: Ecclesiastes 7-12

Often lost in all Solomon's talk about vanity and emptiness and chasing the wind is the number of times he encourages the reader to enjoy life. Enjoy the time they have been given. Enjoy the hours and days of blessing. Enjoy the seasons when life is good. Yes, you will experience bad times. Yes, you will experience hardship and adversity. Yes, you cannot place your trust in wisdom, wealth, influence, or a good name. But you can still find joy. Simple pleasures of feasting, friendship, and family.

"In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him." (Ecclesiastes 7:14)

"And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 8:15)

"Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do...Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going." (Ecclesiastes 9:7, 9-10)

"Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment." (Ecclesiastes 11:9)

To be sure, Solomon is encouraging a "sober" joy. A joy tempered by the realities of hard work, adversity, judgment, and death. A deeper joy that transcends superficial happiness. A joy that springs from a deep love of life and all the blessings God has given. The profound joy that comes from a life lived before God in this world. The joyful life for Solomon is not all bubbles and rainbows and unicorns. It's an utterly realistic joy. A joy that acknowledges the harsh truth about our broken world. A joy that walks eyes wide open to pain and suffering. A joy that doesn't run from trouble.

I've been a pastor for almost twenty years. I've spent countless hours counseling people from all walks of life. I've served congregations on the East Coast. The Deep South. The Midwest. And for the last eight and half years, out West here in Colorado. A common thread running throughout all those conversations is the universal desire for happiness. A craving for joy. But it's a joy without hardship. A happiness without sorrow. An unrealistic expectation that life can be lived...indeed should be lived...without pain and suffering. In the most extreme cases, the person seems to believe God "owes" them such a life. It's why one of the most frequent questions I have to help people wrestle with is "Why, God?" Why did God let this happen to me? Why didn't God protect me from this tragedy? Why does God allow suffering? Why does a good God allow evil to exist in the world? Such questions, at their best, reveal the longing we all have for the world to come. The world where God will wipe away every tear, end all injustice, and heal every hurt. At their worst, however, they reveal a deep misunderstanding of the world around us. A false expectation that this life can be lived without experiencing hardship and pain. Solomon is clearly confronting the latter attitude.

So how do you experience the world? When you wake up in the morning, what's your expectation? Do you walk into life eyes wide open to both the good and the bad? Are you willing to embrace the ups and downs? Do you understand that life will be filled with pleasure and pain? Accomplishment and adversity? Success and

failure? And do you seek the deeper joy God offers us in Jesus Christ? I love what Jesus himself says in the Sermon on the Mount, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?...And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these...Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all...Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." (Matthew 6:25, 27-29, 31-32, 34)

June 14, 2018  
**DANGER OF WEALTH**

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 10-11, 2 Chronicles 9, Prov. 30-31

"Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the Lord?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God." (Proverbs 30:8-9)

Today shows us why it is so good to read the Bible chronologically. Juxtaposing these verses over and against the reign of Solomon provides a striking image for us to reflect upon. We tend to think of wealth as a blessing from God. We rejoice when our ship comes in. We are thankful to live in beautiful homes. Drive nice cars. Take nice vacations. Build plenty of wealth to retire on and enjoy the twilight years of life. What we fail to consider is the very real spiritual dangers that accompany such wealth.

Solomon was fabulously wealthy. During his reign, Israel enjoyed a period of great peace and prosperity. The economy was strong. Unemployment was down. Silver was so plentiful it ceased to hold any value. His annual income was astronomical. 666 talents of gold equals almost 40,000 pounds of gold each year. An ounce of gold on the current market is almost \$1,300 dollars.  $\$1300 \times 16 \times 40,000 = \$832$  million dollars per year! Incredible! No wonder he overlaid everything with gold! No wonder he sat on an ivory throne! But with all that wealth came temptation. The temptation to become self-sufficient. The temptation to become self-reliant. The temptation to forget God as the One from whom all blessings flow. And that's exactly what happened. Solomon forgot God. Influenced by his foreign wives, he began building shrines to different gods. Trusting in his own strength, he failed to see the danger before it was too late. Unlike his father David, there is no indication in Scripture that Solomon ever repented of his sin. And though he finished his reign in relative peace, the nation would fracture after his son came to the throne.

"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs." (1 Timothy 6:10) It is often said that money itself is not evil but only the love of money. This is true. However, I am a sinner so when you place money in my hands I have a tendency to fall in love with it. I almost cannot help myself. My heart is corrupt and naturally falls in love with material things. The more I have, the more susceptible I am to this particular sin.

Now consider where I live. Douglas County routinely ranks among the wealthiest counties in the country. The average household income is well above six figures. This places us in the top tenth of a percent of the world's wealthiest people according to [globalrichlist.com](http://globalrichlist.com). And while there are great blessings that come with such wealth, we have to acknowledge there is also great spiritual danger. We have a tendency to forget God. We have a tendency to be self-reliant. Self-sufficient. Self-dependent. Is it any wonder then that our suicide rate is among the highest in the nation as well? Depression. Anxiety. Fear. Addiction. In our "affluenza", we have forgotten God. Our only hope is to repent and turn back to Him. To sacrificially and generously give away our wealth so that it loosens its grip on us. We must seek to store up treasures in heaven for where our treasure is, so our heart will be also.

June 15, 2018  
**ENTITLEMENT**

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 12, 2 Chronicles 10

We live in a narcissistic age. The focus is all on “me.” It shapes the way we work. The way we live. The way we relate to others. Millions of dollars are being spent every year by advertisers and the media to convince us that “we” are the center of the universe. Our needs are what are most important. We deserve more. We are worth more. We are owed more. The messaging is endless. Relentless. Ubiquitous. It’s impossible to escape. The impact is devastating and wide-ranging. Entitlement affects our families, neighborhoods, little leagues, schools, businesses, churches, politics, you name it. Entitlement is the source of the “culture of outrage” one experiences on cable news and social media. Entitlement creates and reinforces divisions in our country because the grand American experiment was founded on the principle of self-sacrifice. But to the entitled, sacrifice is a foreign concept. Serving others anathema. Giving oneself away not in the vocabulary.

Solomon is dead. The wisest and most powerful king Israel has ever known is no longer on the throne. It’s Rehoboam’s time. Will he unite the nation? Clearly the opportunity is there. “Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king.” (1 Kings 12:1) All Israel showed up with the intent of making him king. This is his moment. All he has to do is reach out and capture it. The people even show him the way. Lighten our load a bit. Give us some rest. Your father worked us hard and we need a break. Do this and we will serve you. The wise counselors his father relied on for advice agree. “If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever.” (1 Kings 12:7) Serve the people. Bless them. Honor them. Do right by them. If you will do this, they will serve you forever. But Rehoboam feels entitled. We don’t know his inner thoughts but I imagine he desired to do even greater things than his father. He aspired to an even greater fame. Greater glory. He doesn’t want to serve the people. They exist to serve him. This is the essence of the advice of his peers. Don’t show weakness. Don’t give an inch. Show them you’re twice the man your father was. It is better to be feared than to be loved. “My little finger is thicker than my father’s thighs. And now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.” (1 Kings 12:10-11) Entitlement. You owe me, Israel. I demand you serve me. I demand you submit to me. I demand you love me. The result? Outrage. Rebellion. Division. The fracturing of a once great nation.

Do you struggle with entitlement? When your child is benched at a game, do you automatically blame the coach? Believe he or she has been unfairly treated? When they come home complaining about their teacher, do you automatically assume the teacher has it out for them? When you are passed over for the promotion at work, do you assume something nefarious about the decision? When you hear politicians from the other political party speak, do you impugn their motivations? Assume the worst about their intentions? When you are disappointed at church, do you gossip? Spread rumors and lies? Such attitudes and actions betray a sinful sense of entitlement in your heart that needs to be confessed before the Lord.

Repentance in this area is also important. Repentance replaces entitlement with a servant-heart. A heart that longs to serve others rather than be served. Husbands lay down your lives for your wives. Wives serve your husbands. Fathers, don’t exasperate your children. Serve them as unto the Lord. Employers, don’t treat your employees as commodities to be used but honor them as co-laborers in the work you are doing. Employees seek to serve your employers with a gracious heart and be thankful for the job they provide. Teachers, serve your students. Students, serve your teachers and understand they are there because they have your best in mind. Coaches, serve your players. Do everything you can to further their athletic careers. Players trust your coaches. Put the good of the team above your own success. Politicians, work not for the good of your party but for the good of our nation. Church leaders, seek first the Kingdom of God and do all you can to help those God has entrusted to your care to grow in their relationship with Jesus.

Entitlement poisons everything it touches. A servant-heart blesses everything it touches. Where do you find yourself today?

June 16, 2018  
**THE DANGER OF FALSE WORSHIP**

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 13-14, 2 Chronicles 11-12

"Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim and lived there. And he went out from there and built Penuel. And Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah." So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, "You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. Then this thing became a sin, for the people went as far as Dan to be before one. He also made temples on high places and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the Levites. And Jeroboam appointed a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month like the feast that was in Judah, and he offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made. He went up to the altar that he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, in the month that he had devised from his own heart. And he instituted a feast for the people of Israel and went up to the altar to make offerings." (1 Kings 12:25-33)

Yesterday, we read about Rehoboam's folly as he refused to listen to wise counselors and instead took his advice from fools. The result was the dividing of a nation. God had ordained Jeroboam to take over the northern kingdom of Israel. Ten tribes were entrusted into his hands. God was with him. God had established him. God had raised him up to be king. But Jeroboam was scared. Afraid of what might happen if his people returned to Jerusalem for worship. He was afraid their hearts would return to the house of David and he would lose his kingdom. So makes a tragic mistake. Rather than trust God, he creates his own system of worship. Rather than give God the worship He deserves and demands, Jeroboam makes idols. Establishes his own priesthood. Built his own temples and high places. Established his own feasts. To be sure, these things paralleled the system laid out in Scripture. They had the same forms and functions. They seem to accomplish the same purpose which was the worship of Yahweh. But they were not the same and the consequence for falsely worshiping Yahweh is utter destruction. The northern kingdom of Israel will be wiped off the map. The people will be scattered, never to return. It's a painful reminder of how deeply God cares about His own glory. Worship is about Him, not about us.

This story serves as a sobering reminder of how dangerous it is to bring our personal preferences into worship. This is something that afflicts so many churches in America today. God's people complain about the style of music. The personality of the preacher. The shape of the liturgy. God's people "judge" or "evaluate" the quality of worship by the emotional connection they feel during the experience. God's people seem far more interested in "relevance" than in biblical faithfulness. As such, Jeroboam's story should bring us all to our knees in repentance.

God cares about our worship. He expects, even demands, His people worship Him in Spirit and in Truth. He expects us to enter into worship solely focused on bringing honor and glory to Him alone. For He alone is worthy to be praised! Worship that honors God is faithful to Scripture. Music that honors God has little to do with style and everything to do with the words being sung. Prayers that honor God are humble and contrite. Liturgy that honors God connects us with the saints who have gone before us and we join them even as they worship now around God's throne. In short, while the ceremonial laws governing worship have been fulfilled by Christ, we still must give God the worship He deserves and demands. Anything less is an abomination. (And yes, I use that word intentionally...)

So let me be bold here. If you find yourself in worship thinking about how much you hate the music and refusing to sing...you are in sin. If you find yourself bored in worship even as the gospel is being preached...you are in sin. If you the primary reason you attend church is to be entertained or to be emotionally moved...you are in sin. If you jump from church to church without ever committing your gifts, talents, wealth, and abilities to a local church family...you are in sin. If you go to church to "be fed" rather than to give God the honor and praise He deserves...you are in sin. If you attend worship flippantly, casually, or only when it's convenient for your schedule...you are in sin. You must repent. You must ask God to forgive you and grant you a heart for true worship. Neglecting the worship of the Living God is serious, friends. Make sure your heart is right before God.

June 18, 2018  
THE FIRST STEP

Readings for the day; 1 Kings 15:1-24, 2 Chronicles 13-16

Life is full of challenges. Ups and downs. Successes and failures. Live for very long at all and you will experience struggle and heartbreak. It's part and parcel of living in this broken world. In over twenty years of ministry, I have had the privilege of walking with people through some of the hardest times in their lives. Times of great fear and stress. Perhaps it was a marriage that was failing. Children who wandered astray. Corporate downsizing. Cancer. Sudden death. In almost every case, our first instinct is to go with what we know. Play to our strengths. Muster all our resources so we can make it through. We use our wealth, position, privilege, influence, relationships, talents, and abilities to cope with the pain. And although it almost feels instinctual. Rational even. It is almost always the wrong decision.

We see this play out in the lives of the kings of Israel and Judah. Over and over again, they are confronted with crisis. War. Famine. Disease. You name it. And over and over again, God reaches out to His people. He longs for them to turn to Him for comfort and provision and strength and protection. But they reject God. They pay off neighboring kingdoms. They utilize diplomatic back channels. They compromise on any number of levels, hoping to make it through. But God is watching. "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him. You have done foolishly in this, for from now on you will have wars." (2 Chronicles 16:9) God is looking for a people who will seek Him with all their hearts. "And they entered into a covenant to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers, with all their heart and with all their soul..." (2 Chronicles 15:12) When God's people are faithful, they are blessed. God is their strength. He is their present help in times of trouble. When God's people are unfaithful, they are cursed. God withdraws His protective hand. Gives them over to their desires and lets them suffer the consequences.

Life is a battlefield. The Kingdom of God is always at war with the kingdom of self. This is true in every sphere. Marriage. Family. Neighborhoods. Schools. Work. Politics. Church. You name it. Every time two or more are gathered in Jesus' name, He is with them. And in being "with them", the conflict is joined! The battle engaged! Our enemy will not go gently into the goodnight. He will not fade away easily or give up his territory willingly. The struggle is real, friends. And it impacts every choice we make from the most significant to the most mundane.

When you wake up in the morning, the battle begins. Will you seek God's Kingdom first or satisfy your own needs? This impacts who gets the bathroom first, who feeds the kids, and who makes the bed. It impacts who makes the morning coffee at work, who takes out the trash, and who fields the nasty phone call. It impacts how money gets spent, how time is scheduled, and where resources are brought to bear. God wants all of it, friends! He will not settle until He is Lord of all of life! Until every knee bows – in heaven, on earth, and under the earth - and every tongue confesses that He is Lord! So let me encourage you to make your "first step" today a step of faith. Place your trust in Jesus for all your needs and watch Him go to work.

June 19, 2018  
**TOTAL DEPRAVITY**

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 15:25-34, 16, and 2 Chronicles 17

Humanity is totally depraved. Left to our own devices, we will turn to sin over and over again. "Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly." (Proverbs 26:11) This is a pattern revealed in Scripture from the opening pages of Genesis forward. God raises up a man or woman after his own heart. Think of Seth. Noah. Abraham and Sarah. Moses. Hannah. Samuel. David. But as each generation passes, things go from bad to worse. The faithfulness of our forefathers is lost in our lust for power and control and self-gratification. We've seen this before and we'll see it again. Jeroboam abandoned the ways of David. Despite the fact that God Himself raised him up and gave him the northern kingdom, Jeroboam refused to worship God in the way He deserves and demands. The result is chaos. A kingdom in constant conflict. Assassinations. Betrayal. Rebellion. And throughout this refrain, "He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord..."

What keeps us from experiencing a similar fate? Faith. I love how the Bible describes King Jehoshaphat. 2 Chronicles 17:6, "His heart was courageous in the ways of the Lord." What does this mean? Jehoshaphat removed all the idols and shrines that had been built on the hills throughout Judah. He loved God and followed His commandments. He sent out his officials to the farthest reaches of his kingdom to bring God's Word to the people. Doesn't that sound like the Great Commission from Matthew 28? Rather than wait for the people to come to him, come to the Temple, come to Jerusalem to learn about the ways of God; Jehoshaphat is so passionate about God, he sends out evangelists!!! Incredible! And what happens as a result? Jehoshaphat is given great honor by the Lord. Wealth and riches begin to flow into his hands. Power and authority. His kingdom experiences a season of peace for the fear of the Lord had fallen on everyone around them.

Is your heart courageous in the ways of the Lord? What does that look like today? Not much has changed in a few thousand years. Do you seek God daily for wisdom and guidance and strength? Do you love His Word? Hunger and thirst for time with Him? Do you love to worship? To gather with God's people to bring God praise? Do you seek to serve Him in all you do? Is your work an offering? Is your home a temple? Do you share the good news of the gospel with those around you who do not know the Lord?

Do you pray for revival in our nation? Do you want to see God move powerfully in our town? What is required is men and women of faith whose hearts are courageous in the ways of the Lord! It's literally the only answer and the only hope we have! I've seen it in action. I've seen what happens when men and women dedicate their lives to God. They plant churches. They risk pain and suffering and persecution and death for the sake of the gospel. They give up all they have for the glory of Christ. If I've learned anything from my Ethiopian brothers and sisters it is this...nothing can stop a man or woman whose heart is courageous in the ways of the Lord! Thousands of new churches. Hundreds of thousands of new believers. Entire communities and regions being transformed. There's simply nothing like it on earth!

June 20, 2018  
THE WORD OF THE LORD

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 17-19

I love the story of Elijah. I love his faithfulness. I love his courage. I love his passion. I love his heart. What makes Elijah so great was his ability to listen to the Word of the Lord. His sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. His humble submission and willingness to sit in God's presence in silence. There was nothing great about Elijah. Nothing unusual. Nothing out of the ordinary. He was simply a human being. A human being like any other human being. A man just like any other man. But he was called to play a specific role in God's Kingdom and the life of Israel.

Elijah was a prophet. A man set apart to hear the Word of the Lord and deliver it to God's people. The Word of the Lord came to Elijah, telling him there would be a famine in the land and to go and live by a brook where the ravens would feed him. When the brook ran dry, the Word of the Lord came to Elijah and told him to go to Zrephath where a widow would care for him. When the widow's son died, the Word of the Lord came through Elijah to raise him the dead. The Word of Lord challenged Elijah to risk his life and confront King Arab. Queen Jezebel. 450 prophets of Baal. After a miraculous victory, the Word of the Lord opened Elijah's eyes to see the coming rain. When Elijah ran for his life, the Word of the Lord again came to him bringing comfort and peace.

Notice where the power lies. Not in Elijah. Not in his strength. Not in his confidence. Not in his power. No, the Word of the Lord has an authority all its own. A divine power to tear down every stronghold and every high thing that sets itself against the knowledge of God. It is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe, Jew and Gentile alike. And if there is anything that sets Elijah apart, it is his obedience. Simply his willingness to hear and obey, seemingly without question. This is what makes him great.

Do you want to be great in the Kingdom? Do you want to do great things for God? Do you want the abundant life Jesus promises? Do you believe you will do greater things than even Jesus himself? As He promises in John 14:12? "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12) You don't need wealth. You don't need education. You don't need professional success and achievement. All you need is obedience. A humble spirit. A willing heart. God specializes in using such vessels for His glory in the world.

June 21, 2018  
**GOD OF THE HILLS AND THE VALLEYS**

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 20-21

Do you know what God cares about most? His name. His glory. Whenever anyone would diminish Him in any way, God responds. God acts. God reminds us who He is and what He's all about. Ben-hadad invades Israel. He places his trust in his power. His military might. The 32 client kings who joined him. His numbers are overwhelming. Israel has no chance. But Ben-hadad makes a fatal mistake. He underestimates God. Overconfident. Prideful. Arrogant. He defies God and suffers an embarrassing defeat. Licking his wounds, he prepares yet another invasion. Again he gathers his forces. Again his numbers are overwhelming. Again Israel has no chance. But once again, Ben-hadad underestimates God. His servants encourage him in his foolishness. "And the servants of the king of Syria said to him, "Their gods are gods of the hills, and so they were stronger than we. But let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they." (1 Kings 20:23) Once again, he is defeated. Not by Israel but by the Lord as God declares His authority over both hills and plains.

You would think Ahab would learn from this experience. Sadly, he does not. He too underestimates God. He refuses to obey God and devote Ben-hadad to destruction. He compromises. He equivocates. He cuts a deal. But God doesn't cut deals. God will never compromise. He is fiercely jealous for His name and His fame. Ahab compounds his sin by concocting a scheme with his wife to steal Naboth's vineyard. He not only has Naboth killed but he takes possession of his family inheritance. In all these things, Ahab shows himself to be selfish and petulant. Almost like a child. He pouts when he doesn't get his way. He gets angry and offended easily. He refuses to listen to God until it is too late and he dooms his son in the process.

What do you believe about God? Is He only the God of the mountaintops of your life? Is He only present when you feel a spiritual high? Have a moving experience during a worship service? Do you only connect with Him when you are in worship on a Sunday morning? What do you believe about God? Is He the God of your valleys as well? Those times when you feel like you're walking in darkness? Those moments when depression and despair threaten to overwhelm? Those experiences which devastate and cause so much pain? Is He there with you? What do you believe about God?

What you believe matters. What you believe drives how you behave. If you believe God is limited. Weak. A God who is NOT omnipresent or omnipotent. Then you might act like Ben-hadad or Ahab. Believing God is confined to either the hills or the valleys of your life, you may believe you can get away with a certain level of sin. You may believe God helps those who help themselves. You may believe you can make it on your own. And you will fall into the trap of self-sufficiency. You will rely on your own wisdom and strength. And you will fall short of God's glory. On the other hand, if you do believe God is all-powerful and ever-present, then you will act accordingly. You will submit every decision. Every action. Every thought to Christ. You will seek to bring all things under His Lordship. You will seek to align your will to His rather than the other way around.

God cares about His glory. God cares about His great name. And God intends to fill the earth with His glory through the faithful obedience of His people. This was as true for Israel as it is for us today. This is why Jesus says to His disciples, "If you love me, keep my commandments." (John 14:15)

June 22, 2018  
ACCOUNTABILITY

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 22, 2 Chronicles 18-20

Do you have a Micaiah in your life? Someone who is willing to be honest? To give it to you straight? Someone who is unafraid to spare your feelings? Do you have someone in your life who holds you accountable? Who asks you hard questions? Who is willing to confront you on your sin? Do you have someone in your life who you listen to? Respect? Love enough to receive their critique well? Sadly, it's my experience that most Christians do not have such a person in their life.

Ahab such a person...and he hated him. "There is yet one man by whom we may inquire of the Lord, Micaiah the son of Imlah, but I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil." (1 Kings 22:8) Ahab was an insecure king. He didn't want to hear the truth. He surrounded himself with people who would tell him what he wanted to hear. Sycophants. "Yes-men." People who did not have Israel's best in mind but only their influence and position before the king. It was so obvious, King Jehoshaphat immediately picked up on it as they planned their attack on Ramoth-gilead. Jehoshaphat wanted to hear from the Lord so he asked Ahab to call a real prophet. Someone who was willing to speak the truth. To share God's Word even if it involved judgment. So Ahab calls Micaiah. And Micaiah delivers the bad news. "I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd. And the Lord said, 'These have no master; let each return to his home in peace.'" (1 Kings 22:17) Ahab throws up his hands. I told you so. This guy has it out for me. He never brings me good news. And then Micaiah goes on, "Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; and the Lord said, 'Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, 'I will entice him.' And the Lord said to him, 'By what means?' And he said, 'I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And he said, 'You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.'" (1 Kings 22:19-22)

This section is key. When we refuse to repent. When we refuse to humble ourselves before the Lord. When we refuse to listen to His voice. He brings judgment. He forces us to our knees. He actively opposes the proud. God sends a lying spirit into the sycophants that Ahab surrounded himself with. He uses the very means Ahab had chosen to insulate himself against the Word of God to bring about Ahab's destruction. Let that sink in for a minute.

Now let me ask again, do you have a Micaiah in your life? Someone who can speak hard truth to you in love? Someone who is bold enough to hold you accountable? Someone you submit to? Someone you humble yourself before? Someone who is close enough as a brother and/or sister and who is faithful enough to confront you on your sin? If you do not have such a person in your life then let me suggest you may have made the same mistake – wittingly or unwittingly - as Ahab. You have surrounded yourself with people who do not have your best in mind and you need to go deeper. You need to challenge yourself. Make yourself vulnerable. Empower another person to hold you accountable. The reality is we do not "die to self" naturally. We must be forced to give up our life. We must be challenged to give up self. We must be held accountable as we struggle along this narrow way.

June 23, 2018  
MIRACLES

Readings for the day: 2 Kings 1-4

Why does God perform miracles? What is the point of signs and wonders? Why do they seemingly happen in some places but not others? Why do they appear so random? In our reading today, both Elijah and Elisha perform miracle after miracle. Future telling. Pools of water suddenly appearing in the desert. Water purification. Incredible military victories. Vessels overflowing with oil. Resurrection. Driving out poison with flour. Multiplying bread to feed a hundred men. To the skeptical, stories like these make the Bible seem primitive and superstitious. To the doubter, stories like these can be confusing and frustrating as they wrestle with why they don't seem to happen much anymore. To the faithful, stories like these encourage belief and deeper trust in God. However, the question still remains...why does God perform miracles?

Why does God break through the time/space continuum? Why does He suspend the laws of nature and the universe? Why does He intervene in certain situations but not others? Reach down and touch certain lives and not others? These are important questions that must be faced and thankfully, the Bible provides a clear answer.

First and foremost, miracles are given for the purpose of pointing God's people to faith. They are not ends in and of themselves. They are signposts. Pointing beyond themselves. They are given to direct our attention heavenward to the Lord of all creation. The Author of all life. They are stark reminders that we are not at the mercy of our circumstances. This world and all the natural laws that govern it – from gravity to thermodynamics to photosynthesis - is not all there is. There is a God who stands above and beyond such laws, who is able to set them aside for reasons He Himself only knows and understands.

Secondly, miracles are given so that God's people might always cling to hope. Even when circumstances seem their most dire. When evil seems to be on the march. Injustice and oppression winning the day. Persecution at its fiercest. Rage and violence burning white hot. Disease ravages the body. Famine and poverty threaten our well-being. Even in the darkest of times, we still have hope. Hope in a God who can and does intervene. Hope in a God who draws near the broken-hearted and crushed in spirit. Hope in a God who fights on behalf of the poor and oppressed and outcast and stranger.

Third, miracles are given to remind us how limited and finite we are as creatures. Power. Wealth. Influence. Control. We like to live with the illusion that we are the masters of our own destines. The captain of our fates. We like to think we are in charge. We like to act like we've got everything under control. But miracles remind us who truly holds the power. Miracles remind us of our relative insignificance in the grand scheme of things. Miracles bring us face to face with the power of God and, like Job, we shut our mouths and fall on our faces before Him.

Ultimately, miracles force us to look beyond ourselves. Beyond our needs. Beyond our circumstances. Beyond our wisdom. Beyond our strength. Miracles force us to trust in God. To trust in His purposes and His design. We cannot bend God to our will. There is no magic formula to get God to do our bidding. Miracles happen on His time and in accordance with His will. Our job is to believe. To have faith. To place our lives in His hands and trust Him for the outcome.

June 25, 2018  
**OPEN OUR EYES**

Readings for the day: 2 Kings 5-8:1-15

I have heard it said that the world has yet to see the power that would be unleashed through one man or woman who's sold out to God. I disagree. I think we see such power all the time. Certainly in Scripture. Take the story of Elisha for instance. He's like a one-man wrecking crew when it comes to Syria. Ben-hadad wanted to destroy Israel. Invaded time after time. He had the best generals. Mighty men of valor like Naaman. The odds were surely in his favor. But Israel had one advantage...Elisha. A man who loved God with all his heart. From Elisha's deep faith sprung wisdom and insight and even prophetic utterances. He thwarted the plans of Ben-hadad to such an extent that his counselors believed it was like Elisha was hanging out in Ben-hadad's bedroom!

Elisha posed such a great threat that Ben-hadad sent his entire army on a seek and destroy mission. Find him. Kill him. Destroy whatever city is giving him refuge. So Elisha and his servant wake up one morning only to see the Syrian army arrayed in all its might before them. It must have been an intimidating sight. The servant is immediately afraid. What will we do? How will we survive? But Elisha doesn't miss a beat. He asks God to open the eyes of his servant so that he can see what Elisha sees. Horses. Chariots. The mountains ringed with fire from the army of the Lord.

This is one of my favorite stories in all of Scripture because of the reminder that though my circumstances may seem bleak. Though I may undergo all kinds of trials and tribulations. Though I may suffer and struggle and hurt. Though the enemy wage war against me. Though the government or culture or society grow increasingly hostile to the gospel. No matter what may come, my adversaries – as numerous as they may be - are no match for the armies of the Lord! His sovereign hand continues to lead and guide and protect. His power cannot be measured. His wisdom cannot be fathomed. And if I will simply lift my eyes above the hills, I will see where my true help comes! (Psalm 121)

"Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all." (Ecclesiastes 9:11) I frequently find myself in positions where I am weak. I have no power. No authority. I am not strong or swift or wise or wealthy. In those moments, I am tempted to despair. And that's when God has me right where He wants me! God does His best work when I come to the end of myself. God does His greatest work when I get out of the way. God is at His most glorious when I am weak and afraid and lonely and have nowhere else to turn. All I have to do is open my eyes. See the power He has brought to bear. Sit back and watch Him go to work. Trust Him for the victory.

June 26, 2018  
**WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY WHEN I'M GONE?**

Readings for the day: 2 Kings 8:16-29, 2 Chronicles 21-22:1-9

"And he departed to with no one's regret." Woof. That's rough. To come to the end of your life with no one to mourn your passing. No one to make fire in your honor. No words shared at your funeral. Nothing to say in your obituary beyond your birthdate and death date. Perhaps Jehoram earned his fate. After all, he killed all his brothers when he ascended the throne. He enticed the people to abandon the worship of the Living God. He lost several battles. Suffered terribly at the end of his life, dying in great agony. He left Judah far worse than he found it. All in all, a terrible king.

I've performed these kinds of funerals. Funerals where very few people attend. Very few words are said. Very few kind sentiments expressed. I remember a tragic funeral for a young woman who was kidnapped and murdered. She ran with a rough crowd all her life and it tragically caught up to her. All her closest friends could talk about was the way she partied. How much she could drink. It was heartbreaking. I remember a funeral for an older man who died from alcoholism. About three or four people showed up for his funeral and they all wanted it over as soon as possible so they could get out of there. No words to share. Nothing about love. Compassion. Family. He died pretty much alone. To no one's regret.

These moments are burned into my memory. I cannot shake them no matter how hard I try. They serve as a lesson to us all about how we live and why we live. To honor what's truly important in life. God. Family. Friends. To take the time and make the time to live not for ourselves but for the sake of others. To give ourselves away in an attempt to make this world a better place. To leave this world better than the way we found it. It may be breaking a generational pattern in your family. Speaking kindly to friends in need. Helping a stranger. Maybe it's serving in a particular mission endeavor at home or abroad. Or just taking the time to tuck your kids into bed at night and tell them a story. Sometimes the most significant moments of our lives are the simplest.

Through it all, the most important thing we can do is seek after God. Ask Him for His wisdom to show us the way. To help make our lives count. Serving Christ is the best way to leave a legacy as we have seen over and over again throughout the books of 1&2 Kings and 1&2 Chronicles. The legacies of each king is measured primarily by how they honored God with their lives. Honor God and their lives and subjects were blessed. Dishonor God and their lives and subjects were cursed. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you." (Matt. 6:33) Sounds like a great way to live!

June 27, 2018  
DEJA VU Missed Day

Readings for TODAY: 2 Kings 9-11, 2 Chronicles 22:10-12, 23

June 28, 2018

DEJA VU

Readings for today: 2 Kings 12-13, 2 Chronicles 24

Well, it happened. Missed my first day. I realized it when I woke up this morning. Here's the really cool thing. Lightning didn't strike me. God wasn't up in heaven shaking his head. Turning his back. Giving me the silent treatment. No judgment. No condemnation. Just joy that I was back again today praying and reading and reflecting on His Word. I've been reading through the Bible in a year for over twenty years now and somewhere along the way I always get behind. No worries! The great thing about the Bible is you just pick up where you left off or if you get too far behind, you just skip ahead. And God always honors the time we put in.

As I read the passages for yesterday and today, I see the same tragic pattern emerging. The same pattern that's been in place since the Fall. Cain and Abel. The state of the world just before the Flood. Tower of Babel. The time of the Judges. Left to her own devices, humanity inevitably descends into godlessness. Violence. Suffering. Pain. Jehu is called to be God's hand of justice. He executes God's will in a brutal, terrifying fashion. It is a harsh reminder of how seriously God takes our sin and serves as a foreshadowing of hell. By contrast, the rise of Joash reminds us God always claims a remnant for Himself. A faithful people who follow His will and provide hope for the nation. Joash lived most of his life in faithfulness and the result is peace and prosperity and security. He restored the Temple. He cleansed the land of idolatry. He led the people back to true worship of the Living God.

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. We see this dynamic played out over and over again throughout the Scriptures. I love what it says in 2 Kings 13:23, "But the Lord was gracious to them and had compassion on them, and he turned toward them, because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them, nor has he cast them from his presence until now." No matter how far humanity falls. No matter how bad things may get. No matter how much violence and suffering and pain may be taking place. God is faithful. God is true. God is steadfast. Immovable. He will not abandon us. He will not forsake His people. He loves us with an everlasting love. "For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning." (Psalms 30:5)

June 29, 2018  
COMPROMISE

Readings for the day: 2 Kings 14-15, 2 Chronicles 25-27

High places. We see them pop up all over the place in the Kings and Chronicles. Often the righteousness of kings is judged on whether or not they tolerate them. What are they? Originally, they were sacred spaces where the Canaanite tribes worshiped their gods. If you flip back to Deuteronomy 12, you read these words, "You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place." (Deut. 12:2-3) Yahweh had set His people apart. They would be different. They would not be like any other tribe or nation. Because they were a nation of priests, they would worship Yahweh in the way He prescribed. "But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. And there you shall eat before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the Lord your God has blessed you." (Deut. 12:5-7)

Where was this place? Originally, it was the Tabernacle that traveled with them in the wilderness. After Solomon, it was the Temple in Jerusalem. This was the place where God had set His name and indwelt with His presence. This was the "place" the Israelites were commanded to seek when they worshiped. However, the travel could be difficult. The cost was high. It meant time away from the fields. Time away from home. After the kingdoms split, it meant possible defection by the northern tribes so the Israelite kings set up their own shrines (the sin of Jeroboam) and forbid their people from traveling to Jerusalem at the prescribed times. The people set up their own shrines to Yahweh on the very high places He once commanded them to destroy. If we assume the best of them, they were trying to worship Yahweh. Trying to remain faithful. Just not in the way He demanded or the way He deserved. At their worst, they adopted the worship practices of the locals and sought other gods.

God cares about our worship. He cares about what happens week in and week out in local churches all over the world. Not because God is taking attendance but because God seeks worshipers who will worship Him in Spirit and in Truth. Worshipers who will give Him the worship He demands in the way He deserves. Worshipers who will not compromise. Worshipers who will honor Him as holy. Worshipers who refuse to make themselves the center of the experience. Worshipers who lay aside their wants, their needs, their desires, their preferences to come before the Lord in humility. To do anything else is to create a "high place." A shrine to another god. And most of that time, that "god" is Self. The besetting sin of the Western Church is the idolatry of self. We are the object of our worship. Our satisfaction is the key performance indicator. We engage worship based on our own personal preferences. We refuse to honor God as holy. God as supreme. God as Lord. We are proud. We are arrogant. We think far too much of ourselves. And if the lives of the kings teach us anything it is this...God will not be mocked. We will be judged on the basis of who or what we worship.

Where are the high places in your life? Do you find yourself despising the gathering of God's people? Do you find yourself avoiding weekly worship? Do you find yourself struggling to hear the Word? Sing the songs? Pray the prayers? Let me gently but boldly call you to repentance, friends! Remember whose presence you are in! Remember who you've come to serve! Remember what worship is all about! Repent. Confess. And ask the Spirit to renew your passion for true worship.

June 30, 2018  
LOVE YOUR ENEMY

Readings for the day: Jonah 1-4

Jonah is a great book. Especially when we read chronologically. We just finished reading about the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians and now we read of God's prophetic attempt to call those same Assyrians to repentance. Jonah is an unwilling prophet to say the least. He must have had a tremendously frustrating career. His own people refuse to follow the Lord. They keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again. They are unfaithful. They are unworthy. They are idolatrous. They are evil. As a result, God sends the Assyrians to punish them. To drive them to their knees in humility and repentance. When that doesn't work, those same Assyrians become the instrument of His righteous judgment on His own people. One can only imagine the hatred a man like Jonah would harbor for such people. They are Gentiles. Unbelievers. Unclean. Unworthy of God's grace. But then he receives the call to go and preach the gospel to them. What the heck?!

Jonah is a great book to read today. Our world is full of hatred and enmity. Social media gives full vent to our anger and rage. Judging others seems to be the order of the day and grace is in short supply. If someone disagrees with you, they are almost sub-human. Worthy only to be unfriended, unfollowed, and publicly shamed. If someone questions you, they become a target. Attacked. Torn down. Their character assassinated. If someone doesn't affirm you, they get cut out of your life almost immediately. It is sad and disheartening and ultimately self-destructive.

Perhaps this is why Jesus calls us to love our enemies. Love humanizes. Love requires grace and forgiveness. Love requires listening and humility. Ultimately, love is selfless. It forces us to take a good hard look at ourselves, our motives, our intentions, and lay them aside before engaging others. It celebrates diversity and assumes the best of others. It honors difference and dignifies those who disagree. It is deeply practical. And it is what should set believers apart from the rest of the world.

Unfortunately, believers seem to have forgotten this command. They explain it away. Rationalize it. Reject it. And the result is only more pain as the vicious cycle continues. Every believer should ponder and pray over the closing words of Jonah..."When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:8-11) We need to ask ourselves if we do well to be so angry? So enraged? We need to ask ourselves if we pity those who are like us more than those who are different? Pity those who agree with us more than those who disagree? Pity our friends more than our enemies? Should God not pity Democrats and Republicans? Liberals and conservatives? Whites and blacks? Asians and Latinos? Aboriginal people as well as immigrants? Should God not pity Americans as well as Mexicans? Israelis as well as Palestinians? North as well as South Koreans? Should God not pity Trump supporters as well as Hilary supporters? Rich as well as poor? Privileged as well as under-privileged? The list is infinite but thankfully so is God's grace.

Who are you at war with in your life today? Who engenders hatred in your heart? What enemies is God calling you to reach? Will you go? Or will you run?