

BIBLE IN A YEAR

BIBLE, FOLLOWING JESUS, DISCIPLESHIP

2019

STUDY AND COMMENTARY

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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June 1, 2019
FAILURE TO FORGIVE

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 18:1-19:10, John 20:1-31, Psalms 119:153-176, Proverbs 16:14-15

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 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've read the last few days, 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 and restore him to his place. In his isolation, Absalom begins to conspire to steal the kingdom. David seems blissfully unaware as 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 looking out for themselves. Eventually there is civil war. Absalom is murdered by Joab. 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?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 19:11-20:13, John 21, Psalms 120, Proverbs 16:16-17

June 2, 2019
LOVING JESUS MORE...

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 19:11-20:13, John 21, Psalms 120, Proverbs 16:16-17

"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (John 21:15)

It's THE defining question of our age. The fundamental question of our existence. It separates the follower of Jesus from the fan. The true believer from the casual. And eternity literally rides on our answer. Do we love Jesus more? More than anything else in our lives? More than our possessions? More than our family? More than ourselves? Essentially a restatement of the First Commandment – Thou shalt have no other gods before Me - and Jesus' own summary of the Law - You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength - Jesus' question cuts right to the heart of our faith. Do we truly believe in Christ? Are we truly a follower of Christ? If so, we will seek to love Jesus more than anything else in our lives. We will place Him first. We will prioritize our relationship with Him above all other activities and responsibilities. We will make Him our primary goal in life.

Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these? Do you love me more than this world? Think about all you have seen in the last three years. Think about the miracles you've witnessed. Do you remember when I healed your mother-in-law? Remember when I cast out all those demons? Remember when I raised the dead? Those were signs, Simon, of a new world. A new Kingdom. My world coming into your world. Do you remember standing on top of the mountain and seeing Me in all My glory? Transfigured before your very eyes? The veil between your world and mine grew thin in that moment. Do you remember all I taught you about my world? About love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control? These are the ways of the my world. And what I want to know is do you love my world more than you love your own? Do you love my ways more than you love your own? Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?

Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these? Do you love Me more than your old life? Look around you. Does any of this ring a bell? Do you remember this is the very place I found you. The very place I first called you. Do you remember you'd been fishing all night and were tired. And I asked you to take me back out again. Cast out your nets. See what happens. You did what I asked though I could tell you thought I was crazy. And you brought in such a catch that your nets began to break and your boats began to sink. In that moment, you caught a glimpse of who I was. The Lord of heaven and earth. So when we got to shore and I asked you to give up everything and come follow Me...you did. Now I'm asking again. Do you love Me more than these? More than this old life? More than the boats and the nets and the fish? More than what's familiar? More than what's comfortable? More than what you know? Do you love Me more than your home? More than your business? More than your lifestyle? More than your community? Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?

Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these? More than your family? More than your closest friends? More than these other disciples who are here with you? This isn't a competition. I'm not asking you to be the best disciple or the first disciple or the most devoted disciple. I'm not asking you to stop loving them or loving your family. I am simply asking if you love Me more? Do you love Me supremely? Do you love Me with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? Do you love Me above everything else in your life including your closest relationships? Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?

Such a challenging question. As I said, it cuts the heart of who we are and what we love. You see, friends, Jesus demands that we love Him more than anything else in our lives. More than this world. More than the things of this world. More than our jobs. More than our lifestyles. More than our town. More than our neighborhood. More than our closest friends. More than our kids. More than our spouses. More than we love ourselves. And this is the secret to the Christian life. Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you. Lose your life for my sake and you will find it. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind,

and strength and then you will be able to love your neighbor as yourself. Everything starts with the love of God. Everything flows from the love of God. Everything has its source in the love of God. You want to have the best marriage? Love Jesus more than you love your wife or husband. You want to be the best parent? Love Jesus more than you love your kids. If you're single, do you want to be the best friend or future spouse you can be? Love Jesus more. You want to be the best employer or employee? Love Jesus more than your work. You want to be the best neighbor? Love Jesus more than you love your community. You want to be the best person you can be? Love Jesus more than you love yourself. Do you want true peace and contentment? Define your life by Jesus. Align your life with Jesus. Ground your identity in Jesus. Loving Jesus supremely allows us to love others and other things appropriately. Loving Jesus first allows all our other loves to fall into their proper place. So make Christ your greatest treasure. Love Him more than these...

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 20:14-21:22, Acts 1, Psalms 121, Proverbs 16:18

June 3, 2019
GATHERED WORSHIP

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 20:14-21:22, Acts 1, Psalms 121, Proverbs 16:18

Psalms 120-134 are called the “Psalms of Ascent” in the Bible. Many believe these were the songs Israel sang as they ascended to Jerusalem to keep the three annual festivals detailed in Deuteronomy 16. They are songs of worship. Songs of praise. Songs of thanksgiving. They express the deep gratitude the people feel towards God for all He has done for them. They sing them together. They sing them as they gather. One can almost imagine thousands coming to Jerusalem all singing these songs with one voice. It must have been a powerful, moving scene. In addition, many scholars believe these were the songs Israel sang at different high points in their history like the dedication of Solomon’s Temple or the rebuilding of the walls during Nehemiah’s time. Over and over again, Israel returned to these psalms to express their faith and trust in God.

Christians have built on this tradition of worship. Many churches throughout the world sing these psalms in worship. The Eastern Orthodox Church sings these psalms every Friday during Vespers. The Roman Catholic Church in the west schedules these psalms to be sung during daily prayer. The goal is to remind Christians we are on our own pilgrimage to a Heavenly Jerusalem and these psalms build the spiritual intensity of the worship service as we prepare for the reading of the gospel. It’s a powerful thing to experience.

These psalms are favorites among believers. We love the language of God protecting us. God guiding us. God providing for us. God helping us. “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” (Psalms 121:1-2) “To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens! Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he has mercy upon us.” (Psalms 123:1-2) “Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore.” (Psalms 125:1-2) Something happens to us when we gather together to sing these praises. Something transformative. Something life-changing. We are encouraged. We are strengthened. We are blessed by the experience of being in God’s presence together.

This is the essence of corporate worship. This is why gathering weekly with a community of believers is so vital to the Christian faith. Yes, I know many of us worship Jesus daily on our own. Yes, I know many of us experience Jesus profoundly as we hike or hunt or spend time in nature. But neglecting the worship of God with the people of God places us at risk. It places us out of step with thousands of years of Christian history. It places us out of step with the will of God as revealed in Scripture. It’s frankly arrogant and prideful and foolish to claim we don’t need the church. God loves His bride. God loves His children. God loves having His family together. God loves hearing His people sing. God loves meeting His people in the sacraments. God loves teaching His people through His Word. Jesus said, “For where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them.” (Matthew 18:20)

It is getting harder and harder for Christians to commit to weekly worship. There are so many demands on our time, it is easy to compromise. It is easy to give ourselves a pass. It is easy to assume we can get to it later. But when we privilege other things before corporate worship, we are in grave danger of placing these things above God. We cannot “put God first” and neglect corporate worship. The reality is we cannot love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength without giving Him the worship He deserves and the worship He demands.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 22:1-23:23, Acts 2, Psalms 122, Proverbs 16:19-20,

June 4, 2019
AN AMAZING GOD

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 22:1-23:23, Acts 2, Psalms 122, Proverbs 16:19-20

I once 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?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 23:24-24:25, Acts 3, Psalms 123, Proverbs 16:21-23

June 5, 2019
WHY, GOD?

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 23:24-24:25, Acts 3, Psalms 123, Proverbs 16:21-23

There are so many stories I do not understand. So many things the Bible says that I do not get. I question. I doubt. I struggle. I fight. The cynicism in me wants to chuck the Bible across the room at times. Today is one of those days. Every time I read this story about God inciting David to sin and then turning around to judge him for it baffles me. Sure, I know what the Old Testament scholars say. They argue this is theological spin from the “court scribes” who are trying to make sense of what happened. They argue that the people of Israel were superstitious and took such a strong view of God’s sovereignty that when a plague is unleashed on the nation, they have to come up with some kind of theological rationale. All that sounds good but I’m not sure I buy it.

I think the Bible says what it says. “The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel...” I have spent many hours pondering what it must be like to be a totally holy God interacting with an unholy people. The Bible is clear that not one of us is righteous. All of us are corrupt. Selfish. Greedy. Lazy. We do not do the things we ought to do. We choose self-destruction over and over again. In the way we spend our time. In the food we eat. In the activities we pursue. Medical health professionals everywhere agree. The data is unequivocal. Furthermore, we often make choices that hurt not just ourselves but others. In the words we say. The actions we take. The anger and rage that boil up within. We are so prone to hate and violence. Again, medical health professionals everywhere agree. The data is unequivocal. It’s why I believe if there’s one doctrine in Christianity that is empirically provable, it is total depravity. Original sin. It impacts us all.

If this is true – and I firmly believe it is – then it is truly wondrous God’s anger isn’t kindled against us...ALL. THE. TIME. He has every right to be angry at the way we treat our bodies. The way we treat others. The way we treat the world He has made. He has every right to judge us for our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. He has every right to condemn us for our inaction and unwillingness to love ourselves, others, and the world He has made in the way He demands. He is God. He is the one who made us. He is the Lord of heaven and earth. He is our Creator and we are living in constant rebellion against His sovereign will and plan. And the anger of the Lord does indeed break out against us at times. Especially against His people. Those called and set apart to reflect His glory in the world. Those whom He loves. Those whom He saves. God even uses Satan and evil and sin at times to do His bidding. Consider the case of Pharaoh, Job, Saul, or in this case, David. While I may not understand, God is righteous in His decision because David is an adulterer and murderer. Someone worthy of death. As are the people of Israel. None of them is innocent. Innocence is not a category one can apply to any human being.

So where can we find hope? Only in God’s mercy. Only in God’s grace. I love the words from the Psalmist today. “To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens! Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he has mercy upon us. Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt.” (Psalms 123:1-3) Without God, we are helpless and hopeless. Lost and doomed to wander in darkness. Our strength will fail. Our willpower is not enough. Our self-discipline will crumble. We have nothing. We bring nothing. We offer nothing back to God. Thankfully, He doesn’t need anything from us and out of unconditional love offers everything to us in Christ. He takes our place. He is punished on our behalf. He pays the price for our sin. He bears the full weight of God’s wrath and judgment. He endures. He suffers. He dies. And God’s justice is satisfied. The work is finished. Recompense has been made. Forgiveness is now extended. All I can do is pick my Bible back up and praise God for His amazing grace that saved a wretch like me.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 1, Acts 4, Psalms 124, Proverbs 16:24

June 6, 2019
SUFFERING FOR CHRIST

Readings for today: 1 Kings 1, Acts 4, Psalms 124, Proverbs 16:24

“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” (Philippians 3:8-11)

Something very powerful takes place when we share in the sufferings of Christ. The Apostle Paul experienced it as did the Apostles Peter and John and the new believers in Jerusalem. Christians throughout the ages have experienced it in places like Russia, China, and Ethiopia. I have had the privilege of meeting many of them. Over the past ten years I have personally trained hundreds of church planters in the Horn of Africa. Many of them bear on their bodies the scars of the persecution they face on a daily basis. They’ve been threatened. Beaten. Shot. Stabbed. Imprisoned. Some of them have even died in the field. And still they go. When I ask them how I can pray over them, they never ask for personal safety but always for boldness to preach the gospel in the face of the opposition. It is deeply humbling and inspiring.

I think about these men and women when I read Acts 4. I love the boldness of those first believers. Peter and John are arrested, imprisoned, and tried for preaching about the resurrection of Jesus. They were not among the elite. They had no wealth. No power. No education. They were just ordinary men whom God used to proclaim an extraordinary message. The gospel stirred up the city – as it always does - and threatened those in power - as it always does. So Peter and John were threatened. I imagine they were roughed up a bit as well. But they return home praising God for the opportunity to share in the sufferings of Christ. They shared all that happened with their friends and went to prayer. They praised God for the persecution. Praised God for His sovereign will and plan. Praised God for the opportunity to proclaim the gospel. And they prayed for even more boldness. Even more courage. Even more strength to go forth and share. And God answered their prayers. The room in which they were praying began to shake as they were filled with the Holy Spirit and the gospel went forth with even more power from that day.

What do you pray for when you come against opposition? What do you pray for when you experience suffering and hardship? What do you pray for when you are in pain? For most of us, I imagine we pray for relief. Healing. Safety. Comfort. These are not necessarily bad things to pray for but they certainly are not the most important things. The Apostle Paul experienced all these things and more in his life. He was mistreated, abused, left for dead. He gave up his home. His family. His livelihood. He sacrificed everything for the sake of knowing and serving Christ. And what did he gain in return? Christ. Peter and John and the early believers made similar sacrifices. They considered everything “rubbish” when compared to knowing and serving Christ. And what did they gain in return? Christ. What if – instead of safety and security - you prayed for boldness? What if - instead of comfort and peace - you prayed for courage? What if - instead of provision and protection - you prayed for God to use all that you are and all that you have for His Kingdom work in this world? What would your life look like if God were to answer such a prayer?

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 2:1-3:2, Acts 5, Psalms 125, Proverbs 16:25

June 7, 2019
THE WAY OF DEATH

Readings for today: 1 Kings 2:1-3:2, Acts 5, Psalms 125, Proverbs 16:25

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.” (Proverbs 16:25)

We are all a mix of contradictions. David was a man after God’s own heart and yet at the end of his life seems to die a bitter, vindictive, vengeful man. He orders the death of Joab. A man whose military prowess had won David his kingdom. Twice! David knew Joab was a violent and spiteful man but accepted his service as long as it served his purposes. He orders the death of Shimei, the son of Gera. A man who cursed David when he fled from Absalom. Rather than forgive, David holds onto his grudge and seals Shimei’s fate. Who knows how many others made their way onto David’s “hit list” before he died? Who knows how many scores he settled? Not a good way to go out.

Solomon isn’t much better. Despite being beloved by God and given the gift of great wisdom, Solomon too acts like a petty warlord at times. He sends his enforcer Benaiah to kill Adonijah, his own brother, after he makes a subtle play for the throne. He then exiles Abiathar the priest. He sends Benaiah to execute Joab literally on the altar of God and then to kill Shimei after he fails to keep his word to Solomon. It’s a naked and blatant and brutal consolidation of power.

So we turn to the New Testament looking for hope only to run into Ananias and Sapphira. A couple who concoct a scheme to defraud God and His church. They want credit for their generosity even as they hold back profit for themselves. Their sin leads to sudden death as they literally drop at Peter’s feet. What does it profit a man to gain the whole world but lose their soul in the process?

These are hard stories to read that remind us of the total depravity of humanity. We pursue our own selfish ends so much of the time. How often, when we are hurt, do we choose vengeance over forgiveness? How often do we use people to get ahead? How often do we exaggerate our accomplishments? Deceive others into thinking we are better than we actually are all in the pursuit of self-promotion? These are the corrupt ways of humanity and the Bible makes no bones about where they lead.

How much better the way of Christ? The way of love? The way of grace? The way of mercy? The way of peace? It’s a narrow way to be sure. Many would rather choose the wide path that leads to destruction. It’s a hard way to be sure. Many would rather choose the easy path that leads to slavery and addiction. It’s an impossible way in our own strength and wisdom. But what is impossible for us is not impossible for God! He has made a way. Charted a new path. Blazed a new trail through His Son in our world and those who follow Him receive eternal life as their reward. Reject the way of death. Choose the way of life. Let Jesus be your guide!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 3:3-4:34, Acts 6, Psalms 126, Proverbs 16:26-27

June 8, 2019
THE POWER OF WISDOM

Readings for today: 1 Kings 3:3-4:34, Acts 6, Psalms 126, Proverbs 16:26-27

“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. And God answers his prayers. “And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore,” (1 Kings 4:29) 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!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 5-6, Acts 7:1-29, Psalms 127, Proverbs 16:28-30

June 9, 2019
READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: 1 Kings 5-6, Acts 7:1-29, Psalms 127, Proverbs 16:28-30

Readings for TOMORROW: 1 Kings 7, Acts 7:30-50, Psalms 128, Proverbs 16:31-33

June 10, 2019
BUILDING WITH GOD

Readings for today: 1 Kings 7, Acts 7:30-50, Psalms 128, Proverbs 16:31-33

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.

I am still thinking about the Psalm we read from yesterday. Especially as I read ambitious building projects Solomon undertook. He spends seven years building the Temple of God. This glorious building that would become the beating heart of Israel for generations. Then he spends thirteen years building his own house which includes these different halls where he will conduct the business of the nation. The people labor for twenty long years to bring Solomon's vision to pass. It is a mighty work. It is a hard work. On some level it is the Lord's work. (Though one wonders why Solomon spent twice as long building his own house as he did the Temple of God?)

What work is God doing in your life? What "house" has He called you to build? I distinctly remember a period of time in my own life where I made my own plans. I tried to build my own house without the Lord's blessing. I remember my mentor, Steve Haynes, telling me, "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. Steve 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" 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.

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.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 8, Acts 7:51-8:13, Psalms 129, Proverbs 17:1

June 11, 2019
TRUE PRAYER

Readings for today: 1 Kings 8, Acts 7:51-8:13, Psalms 129, Proverbs 17:1

The prayer of King Solomon at the dedication of the Temple is one of my favorites in all of Scripture. It 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 we 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.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 9-10, Acts 8:14-40, Psalms 130, Proverbs 17:2-3

June 12, 2019
FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

Readings for today: 1 Kings 9-10, Acts 8:14-40, Psalms 130, Proverbs 17:2-3

I love the Book of Acts. The chaos of the early days of the church. God pressing His people outside their comfort zones. Blowing up their expectations. Transforming how they see themselves, one another, and the world.

Jesus told His disciples that they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The gospel was so disruptive in Jerusalem and Judea that believers were being dragged from their homes and thrown in prison. Many were being tortured and killed. The Pharisees were coming after them with a vengeance and Saul – who would later become the Apostle Paul - was at the forefront of it all.

As the disciples scattered, running for their lives, they continued to preach the gospel. And that's how Philip came to Samaria. He preached and performed many signs and wonders and many Samaritans believed. They received the Word of God with open hearts. They were baptized in the name of Jesus. But they had not yet received the blessing of the Holy Spirit so the Jerusalem church sent Peter and John to lay hands on them. Frankly, we do not know why they didn't receive the Holy Spirit at their conversion. It seems in the early days of the church that the Holy Spirit was moving in different ways. Coming to different people at different times. In Acts 2, He comes with power over the disciples as they are praying together, giving them the miraculous gift of tongues. In Acts 8, He comes at the laying on of hands by Peter and John. In Acts 10, He comes as Peter preaches the gospel to Cornelius and his household. It's important not to build our doctrine on these isolated passages but simply to accept the fact that God was doing a new thing in those days and it manifested itself in different ways.

One thing we can take away from this passage is the importance of being filled with the Spirit. When Jesus ascended into heaven, He promised His followers they would not be alone. He would not leave them as orphans in this world. He would send His Spirit to dwell with them. To guide them into all truth. To lead them to a deeper understanding of Christ. To empower them for Christ's service in the world. The Spirit imparts gifts to God's people. The Spirit bears fruit in the lives of God's people. The Spirit is active, constantly transforming us and sanctifying us and making us into the image of Christ.

Most of all, the Spirit brings unity. He brings us together across our differences. It is the Spirit who reconciles Jews and Samaritans. Healing racial divisions going back centuries. It is the Spirit who will bring Jews and Gentiles together into one church. Overcoming cultural and social and ritual divisions that had always kept them apart. It is the Spirit who sends Philip to the side of an Ethiopian official as he returns home. Opening his eyes to the truth of the gospel and sending him forth to proclaim the good news to his own people.

Friends, this same Spirit is on the move today! He regenerates the heart of every believer who comes to faith in Jesus Christ. He dwells within us, bearing His fruit in our lives. He teaches us, opening up the Scriptures to us in ways we can understand. He empowers us, giving us gifts to serve the church and our community in Jesus' name. He brings unity to His people, crossing every divide you can imagine. Breaking through every dividing wall of hostility we tend to set up that keeps us apart. He heals. He reconciles. He drives us from our places of safety and security and comfort to bring this ministry of reconciliation to the world.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 11:1-12:19, Acts 9:1-25, Psalms 131, Proverbs 14:4-5

June 13, 2019

THE DANGERS OF ENTITLEMENT

Readings for today: 1 Kings 11:1-12:19, Acts 9:1-25, Psalms 131, Proverbs 17:4-5

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 motives? 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 essential. 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?

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 12:20-13:34, Acts 9:26-43, Psalms 132, Proverbs 17:6

June 14, 2019
TRUSTING GOD

Readings for today: 1 Kings 12:20-13:34, Acts 9:26-43, Psalms 132, Proverbs 17:6

Today's reading contains another difficult story. The people of Israel sinned a great sin. Their new king, out of fear of losing his newly won kingdom, created two idols and set them up in Dan and Bethel. He called his people to worship at these temples rather than the Temple of God in Jerusalem. He failed to trust God and brought judgment on himself. God sent Jeroboam a prophet. A man of God from Judah who confronted him on his sin. Rather than repent, he tried to have the prophet killed. God intervened. Jeroboam's hand withered. The altar he had just made was torn down. Ashes poured out of it. Jeroboam realized he was in the presence of a true prophet of God. But he refused to repent and instead tried to co-opt the prophet for his own purposes. The prophet refused. God had told him not to eat or drink while he was in the northern kingdom. But on his way home, he met another prophet. An older man who lived in Bethel. He pursued the prophet from Judah and lied to get him to come back to his house. The prophet from Judah disobeyed the command of God and returned. The result was judgment on the prophet and he is killed on his way back home.

It's a confusing story on a lot of levels. It feels like we don't have all the information. Why did the prophet from Judah trust the words of the older prophet from Bethel? Why did he turn aside after being so bold with the king? Why did he not trust the Word the Lord had given specifically to him?

These are good questions to ponder. Especially that last one. I meet with people all the time who fall into this same trap. God gives them a vision. A dream. A special Word designed specifically for them and their life. But they struggle to obey. The people they surround themselves with sow seeds of doubt. Their own feelings of anxiety and fear cause them to turn back. They run into obstacles or hardships along the way and they abandon the cause.

Trusting God is hard. It's been said that God won't give a person more than they can handle. Not true! God often gives us more than we can handle so we will learn to rely on Him. He calls us out of our comfortable spaces. Out of our homogeneous bubbles. Out of safety. Out of security. So that we can serve His purposes in the world. He calls us to sacrifice. To surrender. To submit every area of our lives to Him. He calls us to do things we wouldn't normally choose to do. He calls us to go places we wouldn't normally choose to go. He calls to have conversations we wouldn't normally choose to have. All to further His Kingdom on earth.

Most Christians I talk to can point to examples in their lives where they felt prompted by God to do something totally beyond them. Totally out of the ordinary. Something that felt a little crazy at the time. The people around them wondered what was going on. Some of them tried to convince them to turn aside. They struggled with their own feelings of fear and anxiety. They wondered themselves if this was really God or some other voice they were listening to. But then they stepped out in faith and met God in a profound way.

I think about a friend of mine in South Korea. His name is Pastor Chun. He runs a ministry called Durihana which focused on the rescue of North Korean refugees. Recently, CNN and other news stations have been running stories on him and his work. He is incredible. He is in his sixties and still risks his life to cross the border. He primarily focuses on young girls who've been sold as sex slaves. He's established an Underground Railroad through China into Thailand where he can apply for asylum in South Korea. Many would call his work crazy. Impractical. Even impossible. I am sure he has feelings of anxiety and fear that he battles from time to time. I am sure he's been tempted along the way to pack it in. And yet, he perseveres. Why? Because he trusts God's Word. He trusts God's call. He trusts God's will for his life and even though it has cost him dearly and may cost him his life one day, he considers it an honor to suffer for Christ.

How has God spoken to you in your life? What fears or anxieties hold you back from pursuing God's will? What temptations have you given into along the way that have turned you aside from pursuing God's call? What voices are drowning out God's voice in your life right now? Trust God. Trust His Word. Trust His Spirit. Turn neither to the right nor to the left. Let Him lead and guide and meet you in a powerful way.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 14:1-15:24, Acts 10:1-23, Psalms 133, Proverbs 17:7-8

June 15, 2019

UNITY

Readings for today: 1 Kings 14:1-15:24, Acts 10:1-23, Psalms 133, Proverbs 17:7-8

“Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity!...For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.” (Psalms 133:1, 3)

Psalm 133 is my favorite Psalm. Mainly because I have seen it in action. I have seen what happens when God’s people truly serve Him with one heart and mind. I have witnessed the miracles that take place when God’s people put aside their egos, their needs, their wants, their desires in favor of serving the Kingdom. I have watched God’s Spirit move when God’s people humble themselves. Deny themselves. Pursue forgiveness and reconciliation. Lay aside their need to be safe, both physically and emotionally. It is powerful. Life-changing. It transforms villages. Towns. Cities. Entire tribes, regions, and nations.

True biblical unity requires us to relinquish “self” in favor of others. It requires us to lose our individual identity in favor of the whole. (Job 38:7) It requires us to consider others more important than ourselves. (Phil. 2:3) It requires us to risk. Risk being hurt. Risk being wounded. Risk feeling rejected. It requires us to have courage. Courage to forgive. Courage to pursue reconciliation. No matter what the cost. No matter how many times we get burned. “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) It requires honesty. Transparency. Self-reflection. We must constantly seek to take the log out of our own eyes before we look to take the speck out of our brother’s or sister’s eye. We have to acknowledge we are both victim and perpetrator in all our relationships.

True biblical unity requires the church to lay aside its need to compete. Extend its brand. Criticize other parts of the Body as if “we have no need of them.” (1 Cor. 12:21) It requires leadership to get serious about working together. Working with and for one another. Willing to sacrifice our buildings, budgets, and attendance in order to expand God’s Kingdom in the communities where we serve. It requires mutual submission and accountability. A willingness to step aside and relinquish our platforms when we fall into sin. It requires a radical commitment to love God and neighbor at the expense of our organizations and institutions. Self-denial and picking up our cross is not just a call to the individual Christian but to the church as a community as well!

True biblical unity requires a radical re-orientation of the heart. It is incredibly difficult and challenging which is why it happens so infrequently in Scripture. The unity David experiences as he builds his kingdom will soon give way to division as his own children betray him. We have to constantly be on guard because we are our own worst enemy. Our hearts naturally resist unity because it requires literal death to self. And we have such a strong instinct for self-preservation.

Ultimately, unity is not something we can achieve through our own strength. It must be a movement of God’s Spirit. “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” (1 Cor. 12:13) Have you drunk of the one Spirit? Have you tasted the goodness and glory of God? Are you walking with the Spirit? Keeping in step with Him in all your ways? Unity comes as we relinquish more and more of our lives to the Spirit’s control. Both as individuals and as churches gathered in His name.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 15:25-17:24, Acts 10: 24-48, Psalms 134, Proverbs 17:9-11

June 16, 2019
READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: 1 Kings 15:25-17:24, Acts 10: 24-48, Psalms 134, Proverbs 17:9-11

Readings for TOMORROW: 1 Kings 18, Acts 11, Psalms 135, Proverbs 17:12-13

June 17, 2019
GOSPEL-CENTERED COMMUNITY

Readings for today: 1 Kings 18, Acts 11, Psalms 135, Proverbs 17:12-13

I remember the first truly multicultural worship service I attended. It was in Chicago. In a Hispanic community called La Villita that is located within the larger African-American community of Lawndale. It was a violent place. Rival gangs running the streets. When kids came to youth group, they had to be picked up in vans with blacked out windows because they crossed gang lines. I was in college at the time and we sent a team to serve a local church in the community over Spring Break. We arrived on Saturday and attended worship on Sunday. That particular Sunday, they had done a pulpit swap with a local African-American church. So the preacher and choir were black. The congregation was mainly poor, immigrant Hispanics who only spoke Spanish. And our group was made up of privileged, white college students from Boulder, CO. We got to witness a miracle that day. As the preacher got rolling - as only African-American preachers can!!! - the translator tried his best to keep up. But as the sermon began to crescendo, an incredible thing happened. The translator sat down. The Spirit descended. I watched as everyone heard this man preach in their own language. It was clear that even the Spanish-speakers in our midst were tracking. It was like Pentecost. It was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

God's plan was always to move beyond the confines of the Promised Land and the Jewish ethnic group to reach the Gentile nations. In fact, this was part of the initial promise God first gave to Abraham! In him, all the nations of the earth would be blessed! And it is precisely this promise that is being re-affirmed in the vision Peter receives from the Lord. What was once unclean is now clean. What was once unholy is now holy. What was once excluded is now included. The Gentiles who had been separated from God were now going to be grafted in. Those who were not God's people were now going to be part of God's people. Centuries of racial prejudice were erased in a moment as God sends Peter to Cornelius to lead him to saving faith. The dividing wall of hostility has been torn down. Now the gospel will go forth to the entire world. Every tribe. Every tongue. Every nation will have the opportunity to receive Christ. This is the heartbeat of the Great Commission, the underlying theme of the entire Book of Acts, and the main issue Paul will address in every single one of his letters. Jews and Gentiles living together as one family under God.

Friends, God hates racism. Hates racial segregation. Hates how His family has divided along racial lines. His desire is that all should be saved and not only come to a knowledge of His truth but then join together in authentic community as one family. This is not easy. Sunday morning is still one of the most segregated hours in our country. We have a very difficult time building friendships across racial/ethnic lines. We much prefer to gather with people who look like us, live like us, think like us. In that way, we are much like the party of the circumcision that challenged Peter when he reported to them what the Holy Spirit had done. Sitting down with someone who comes from a radically different life experience is very challenging. We struggle to listen. We struggle to honor them. We struggle to communicate value and friendship because so often their perspective feels threatening to us. All this was true for the early Christians as well. The Jews who first came to faith could not imagine believing in Jesus without circumcision. Could not fathom following Christ without also following the Law. They had been taught for generations that Gentiles were unclean and unholy and to avoid contact with them at all costs. Now God was doing a new thing. Now Jews were being called to embrace Gentiles as their brothers and sisters. The Holy Spirit was being poured out in undeniable ways. How would they respond?

How do we respond? Over the years, I have been blessed with spiritual mentors and friends from a variety of ethnicities and social/economic backgrounds. I have spent time with the urban poor. Been in their homes. Listened to their stories. Heard their struggles. I have spent time in prisons and with ex-convicts who tell me how hard it is to reintegrate back into life after serving their time. The lack of jobs. The probation process. How easy it is to recitivate because at least the prison system is familiar. I have spent time with African-American friends who have helped me understand what it's like to have to grow up guarded and suspicious because you cannot trust the justice system. I have spent time with Hispanic friends who've shared with me stories of racial animus that breaks my heart. I have spent time with Asian-American friends who tell me of the challenges

they've faced as they transitioned from their home country to the USA. More recently, I've listened to Ethiopian refugees share their stories of what it's like to seek asylum in our country. It's overwhelming.

The gospel is designed by God to bring us together. It has divine power to tear down every stronghold, every wall, every division that keeps us apart. The gospel gives us the courage to honor one another in our differences. God delights in the diversity of His family. God's goal is not to make us all color-blind or erase our racial identities. The gospel does not turn us all into one homogeneous lump of clay. Rather it grounds our fundamental identity in Christ which in turn allows to celebrate the beauty and genius of the palate God used to create human beings in the first place! The goal of the gospel is not a post-racial community but one that is inclusive of all races, each with their own unique perspective and experience.

How do we get started? By simply reaching out. Being intentional. Engaging someone who is not like us in conversation. Listening more than speaking. Withholding the tendency we all have to judge someone else's experience or perceive it as a threat. Cultivating the humility to learn. Willingly relinquishing power and privilege in order to create a safe space for people to share. It's not easy but the gospel makes it possible. In fact, the gospel mandates it. Just ask Peter. ;-)

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 19, Acts 12:1-23, Psalms 136, Proverbs 17:14-15

June 18, 2019
HEARING GOD'S VOICE

Readings for today: 1 Kings 19, Acts 12:1-23, Psalms 136, Proverbs 17:14-15

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 Zarephath 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.

This one of my favorite stories in Scripture. Elijah falling into a deep depression after his greatest victory. He must have wondered to himself, "What more can I do? I literally just called down fire from heaven and still it is not enough to bring Ahab and Jezebel to repentance." But once again, Elijah leaned on the Word of the Lord. He traveled to the mountain of God. The same mountain where Moses received the Ten Commandments. The same mountain where God revealed Himself to Israel in fire and smoke and great darkness. On this same mountain, Elijah meets with God. The wind howls. The earth shakes. Fire breaks out. Finally there is silence. God speaks. Whispering His will to His beloved prophet.

I have no idea what life is like for you right now. Perhaps you are feeling buffeted by hurricane force winds. Perhaps you feel the earth giving way beneath your feet. Perhaps fire has broken out threatening to burn everything you've built to the ground. Maybe you've just won an incredible victory. Achieved a lifelong dream. Found professional success. Perhaps you're depressed and lonely and anxious and afraid. Maybe you're even considering taking your life. Let the story of Elijah encourage you. God is not done with you! He meets you in every season of life! He is with you on the mountaintop when everything is going so well. He is with you in the valleys when it feels like you can barely go on. He is speaking to you. He has some things to say to you. You are His beloved and He will never leave you or forsake you.

How can you tune into what He's saying? You have to do what Elijah did. You have to get quiet. You have to build time in your life for silence. Turn off the devices. Turn off the television. Turn off the ringer on your phone. Get by yourself. Find a spot to be alone. It could be in your home. Out on a trail somewhere. Even in your car. God speaks to us in whispers. He will not raise His voice to compete with the chaos of our lives. He will not talk over us. He will not interrupt us. He simply will wait until we are ready. Wait until we slow down. Wait until we get quiet. God wants you to hear Him today. He wants you to hear the things He has to say. Listen, friends. Give Him the space to speak and you will find the peace and comfort your soul craves.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 20-21, Acts 12:24-13:15, Psalms 137, Proverbs 17:16

June 19, 2019
MISSION

Readings for today: 1 Kings 20-21, Acts 12:24-13:15, Psalms 137, Proverbs 17:16

It is amazing to read about Paul's first missionary journey. Coming on the heels of persecution in Jerusalem which cost James his life and put Peter in prison, the church in Antioch responds to the call of the Spirit to send out missionaries to proclaim the good news of the gospel. Barnabus and Paul are chosen after a lengthy time of prayer and fasting and worship. They travel from Antioch to Cyprus to Perga which is a gateway city to the region of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). From there, they hit the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. All told, they travel around 1500 miles in about two years before returning to report the great news that many Gentiles are turning to faith in Jesus Christ!

Three things to note that will become paradigmatic for future missionary endeavors, including in our own day and age. First, the bold proclamation of the gospel. Paul was utterly convinced God had raised Jesus from the dead and that this was the fulfillment of all the promises given to Israel. Many have argued that Paul's conversion represented a radical break with his prior Pharisaism. On the contrary! Paul himself argues that the resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of all he believed. "And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus..." (Acts 13:32-33) Everything changed for Paul that day he met the Risen Christ outside of Damascus. He was confronted with the truth that everything he believed about Israel had now come true in Jesus Christ. Yahweh had indeed raised His Son from the dead in vindication of everything Jesus had taught. Far from being an enemy of the Jewish faith, Jesus was the fulfillment! And Paul's zealous passion for the faith of his fathers now would make him the greatest evangelist the world has ever known.

Second, the proclamation of the gospel was confirmed by signs and wonders. Wherever Barnabus and Paul went, the sick were healed. Demons were cast out. People were set free from oppression. Paul shows no fear in confronting powerful witch-doctors like Bar-Jesus. He calls down God's judgment on the man and strikes him blind. This was not an act of self-promotion. In fact, when the people of Lystra attempt to worship Paul and Barnabus because of the miracle they performed in making a lame man walk, they tore their garments. They refused to let it happen. They assured the people they were not gods but simply ordinary men serving the One True God, the maker of heaven and earth. No, the point of all the miracles and signs and wonders was to bring people to saving faith. To confirm the truth of the gospel they preached.

Finally, persecution. No matter where Paul and Barnabus went, they faced opposition. From the pagans in power like Bar-Jesus to the Jews who refused to receive their message. They were beaten. They were stoned. They were attacked and left for dead. The Word of God is a double-edged sword and it stirred the hearts of those who listened. Some received the good news with glad hearts and came to faith. Others perceived it as a threat and lashed out. There is no such thing as being neutral when it comes to Jesus!

Friends, this same dynamic is being played out the world over even today. My friends in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, and Djibouti all share similar testimonies. They boldly proclaim the gospel in villages, towns, and cities where it has never been heard. Their preaching is often accompanied by many signs and wonders and miracles. The sick are healed. The demon-oppressed set free. The dead are raised to new life. But these men and women face extreme persecution as well. Beaten. Stabbed. Shot. Imprisoned. Left for dead. Their families are attacked. Their livelihoods threatened. Some of them even lose their lives for the sake of the Kingdom. And yet, the "the Word of God continues to increase and multiply!" (Acts 12:24)

God is not done! Despite what you may or may not hear, He is still very much on the move! He will not rest or relent until the whole world hears the good news of the gospel! This is His will! This is His plan! And to this great end, He calls His church! This is the reason we exist! Not for ourselves but for the sake of the world! May we understand and embrace our calling to be missionaries in our communities and to the very ends of the earth!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 22, Acts 13:16-41, Psalms 138, Proverbs 17:17-18

June 20, 2019
BEDROCK FAITH

Readings for today: 1 Kings 22, Acts 13:16-41, Psalms 138, Proverbs 17:17-18

“I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word. On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased. All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth, and they shall sing of the ways of the Lord, for great is the glory of the Lord. For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me. The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.” (Psalms 138)

Yesterday morning I had the privilege of hearing the testimony of Andrew and Norine Brunson. Andrew is a pastor and missionary who was imprisoned for his Christian faith in Turkey for two years. He was picked up along with many others as the national government sought to suppress dissent and Western influence. Falsely accused. Falsely imprisoned. The numerous hearings and trials were a mockery of justice. He spent many days in solitary confinement. His only contact with the outside world was his wife who he got to see for one hour once a week.

Andrew spoke movingly of his time in prison. He was vulnerable about the struggles he faced. Depression. Despair. Suicide. A sense of God’s absence. God’s silence. He didn’t glorify or sugarcoat the “martyr” experience at all. At the same time, he kept pressing in. He kept pursuing intimacy with God. He kept crying out to Jesus. And in his darkest moment, when he felt God’s absence and silence most keenly, he found himself saying over and over again, “Jesus, I love you. Jesus, I love you.” Strip everything away. His job. His church. His family. All his earthly possessions. His hope for the future. His connection to God. And he still found himself in love with Christ. He had hit bedrock. The fundamental truth of his existence was his love for Christ.

Andrew is free now. After two years and much political pressure, Andrew boarded a plane with Norine and returned to the US. He is still recovering from the trauma. He is still grappling with post-traumatic stress. He is in therapy but he is recovering. His love for Christ sustained him in his darkest hour and is helping him heal.

Andrew challenged us all to chase after intimacy with Christ. To ask God for His presence. What does this look like, you ask? I think it best expressed in the Psalm we read today. The Psalmist sings to the Lord with his whole heart. He humbly bows before the Lord in reverence and awe. He walks in close communion with the Lord, crying out to him for answers. He lives his life in confidence, trusting God for his strength in the midst of his trials and temptations. He knows God has a purpose for his life. Both the good and the bad. The joys and the sorrows. The triumphs and the tragedies. He trusts the Lord is with him no matter where he goes. Most of all, he knows what Andrew and Norine discovered. The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. It forms the bedrock of his life.

What forms the bedrock of your life? Strip it all away and what would you have? What’s most fundamental? Most foundational? What have the trials and struggles and sufferings of this world revealed about your relationship with Jesus? Is Christ the stronghold of your life?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 1-2, Acts 13:42-14:7, Psalms 139, Proverbs 17:19-21

June 21, 2019
COMMUNION WITH GOD

Readings for today: 2 Kings 1-2, Acts 13:42-14:7, Psalms 139, Proverbs 17:19-21

God desires intimacy with His people. The real question is do we desire intimacy with Him? I think of the desire for intimacy that drove Elisha to pursue Elijah and stick with him as his time on earth drew to a close. Elisha could feel the loss coming. His grief was beginning to build. He wanted to make sure he treasured every moment. He wanted to see Elijah's ascendance into heaven. He wanted to be there at the very moment when the heavens opened to receive his mentor.

I think of the Gentiles who responded to Paul's preaching. The hunger and thirst they exhibited for God. The way they rejoiced when they heard how much God loved them and longed for a relationship with him. The way entire cities would turn out to hear the Good News.

God desires intimacy with His people. Psalm 139 makes this clear. He searches us and knows us. He discerns our thoughts and emotions. He knows every word before we say it. Every action before we take it. He surrounds us and hems us in on every side. There is no place we can go to get away from Him. Nowhere we can run. Nowhere we can hide. He is in the highest of heavens and the depths of the earth. He is with us even when we go across the seas. No matter where life finds us, His hand is with us. He holds us fast.

God knows us intimately. He shaped and formed us in our mother's wombs. He carefully crafted each and every part. There is nothing we do or say or think that He does not see. God knows us as we are and He loves us as we are but He also loves us too much to leave us there. This is why our frame is not hidden from him. This is why our unformed substance is not a secret to Him. He is with us. He is leading us. He is reaching out to us. He longs for us to turn and pursue intimacy with Him.

How do we pursue intimacy with Christ? Prayer. How do we grow a hunger and thirst for God? Spending time meditating on His Word. How do we develop a passion for a relationship with God? Simply sitting and cultivating a deep awareness of His abiding presence. Friends, let me encourage you to make these words from Psalms 139 your prayer today - "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you...Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 3:1-4:17, Acts 14:8-28, Psalms 140, Proverbs 17:22

June 22, 2019
ANSWERED PRAYERS

Readings for today: 2 Kings 3:1-4:17, Acts 14:8-28, Psalms 140, Proverbs 17:22

On one of my trips to Ethiopia, we met with a group of denominational leaders to launch a new regional training center. The people in this part of the country are beautiful and industrious. They engage in backbreaking work every single day. They are mainly pastoralists who live a semi-nomadic lifestyle depending on the rains. They herd cattle and sheep. They raise camels and goats. They grow mouthwatering fruit. However, they are located pretty far from Addis Ababa which is the capital city of the country. Because of the distance, they do not get a lot of aid from their government or even their denominational leadership. In addition, their remote location and nomadic lifestyle has made it difficult for them to connect with NGO's and Christian non-profits. Different church groups have come and gone over the years but the challenges are too much for them to overcome.

The leaders we met with shared all this with us as we talked about what a partnership might look like moving forward. One of them referenced the story we read today from 2 Kings. He told us it has felt like they've been wandering in the wilderness for years with no water. They have been praying for God to do what He did for Elisha and the kings. Fill the dry streams with water. Flood their valley and their land with resources so they can help their people and bring them to Christ. He truly believed the Petros Network was an answer to their prayers and he has been right. The partnership God led us to forge with these brothers and sisters is leading to incredible fruit as hundreds of churches are now being planted and thousands brought to Christ. Further plans for education and clean water access are also being made as we continue to pray for God to fill the dry streams with His Living Water!!

Where do you need Living Water in your life? The prophet Jeremiah warns us not to seek to quench out thirsty souls from cisterns of our own making. Instead we are to quench our thirst in Christ. We are to come to Him and let Him refresh and renew us every day. Too often, we make our plans just like the kings did. We do not consult God. We do what we think is best. And we end up in the desert. Wandering in the wilderness. Struggle to survive. Today's passage calls us to "inquire of the Lord" when we find ourselves in those spaces. To seek His will through His Word and in prayer. To engage in worship as we seek His presence. Intimacy with Christ is the only thing that can truly quench our thirst and satisfy our hunger. His abiding Presence is the source of Life itself and our connection to Him is vital if we are to flourish.

Engage in self-examination today. Ask Christ to reveal to you those areas of your life where you are trusting in your own wisdom and strength. Engage in prayer today. Ask Christ to give you a hunger and thirst for His Presence. Meditate on God's Word today. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal His will to you through the text. Most of all, trust Christ is for you. He loves you. Christ longs to become a spring inside you eternally flowing with Living Water so you will never be thirsty again.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 4:18-5:27, Acts 15:1-35, Psalms 141, Proverbs 17:23

June 23 2019
CONFLICT

Readings for today: 2 Kings 4:18-5:27, Acts 15:1-35, Psalms 141, Proverbs 17:23

Occasionally I come across people who seem surprised when there is conflict in the church. They have this impression that because we all love Jesus we would never have a difference of opinion. Never have an argument or disagreement. They seem to think “unity” is the same as “unanimity” which simply is not true. From the very beginning, the church has struggled over significant issues. Struggled to come to one mind and one accord on various things. Because we’re all sinners, it is not easy to discern the will and call of God.

Today’s passage highlights a number of different conflicts. Conflict over circumcision and the role of the Jewish law in a Christian’s life. Conflict over restoring an individual who has proved untrustworthy in the past. Conflict over where the Spirit was leading the different evangelism teams to go. Conflict in Philippi over the deliverance of the slave girl. Conflict in prison which results in the conversion of the jailer. It is messy. There is division. The process of discernment often involves trial and error. Mistakes are made. I imagine feelings get hurt. Frustrations mount. But through it all, the Spirit is faithful to make His will known. And the result is the churches are strengthened in their faith and increase in numbers daily as God adds to them those who are being saved.

Is it possible that Acts 15 and 16 are paradigmatic for today? Do they reflect real life in the real church? Should we expect conflict? Expect disagreement? Expect arguments over where to go and what to do and who to involve? And if so, how can we resolve conflict peacefully? In a way that glorifies God and brings honor to His name?

One of the keys to navigating conflict in a godly manner is mutual submission. In Acts 15:1, a question is raised. Is circumcision required for salvation? This is no small matter. It’s a question of identity. For centuries, the rite of circumcision has set the Jewish people apart. Marked them as God’s chosen people. They have suffered for this belief. Been persecuted for this belief. No matter where they found themselves, they were easily identified by the fact they had been circumcised so there was never any place to run or hide. Since Abraham, circumcision has formed the core part of their shared identity and linked them intimately with the covenant promises of God. Now it is being threatened...what should they do? Paul and Barnabas have strong opinions. Based on what they have seen and experienced, it appears the Holy Spirit is moving among the Gentiles. Non-Jews. People who are not circumcised. Why add to what the Spirit is doing? There is quite a bit of dissension and debate. So they decide to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles to make their case. Again, there is much debate. Strong opinions being offered on all sides. Finally, Peter stands up. Shares his heart. Shares his experience. Once again, Paul and Barnabas share about the signs and wonders they have seen in their travels. James calls for a decision and the council decides to let circumcision be a secondary matter. Non-essential when it comes to salvation.

This has huge implications and it is notable that their conclusion “seemed good to the apostles, elders, and the whole church.” Though the issue will continue to come up throughout the rest of the book of Acts, this moment represents a turning point. A general willingness of all parties to mutually submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Another aspect that’s highlighted is their ability to differentiate between essentials and non-essentials when it comes to the gospel. Again, just because a compromise was reached doesn’t mean everyone agreed. Unity is not the same as unanimity. I imagine quite a few of the Pharisees who had come to faith walked away with serious reservations. But they set those reservations aside for the sake of the unity of the church. They recognized the danger of division and how much harm would come should the church fracture over this issue. They made sure to focus on the essentials – not getting mixed up in idolatry, sexual immorality, and maintaining purity which are all more matters of the heart - rather than force Gentiles to become Jews before becoming Christian.

Would that modern-day Christians were able to do the same! Instead of fighting over secondary matters like baptismal practices, worship styles, spiritual gifts, etc., can we not exercise mutual forbearance and submission and keep the main thing the main thing? Rather than pull up stakes the moment we disagree with the preacher or the elder board, can we not put aside our differences for the sake of the unity of the church? Rather than bounce the moment we are disappointed or let down, can we not obey the gospel’s call to forgive and reconcile? Unity does not mean unanimity so we should never expect we will always agree. The key to doing life together is navigating conflict in a way that honors God and keeps Christ at the center.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 6-7, Acts 15:36-16:15, Psalms 142, Proverbs 17:24-25

June 24, 2019
OPEN OUR EYES

Readings for today: 2 Kings 6-7, Acts 15:36-16:15, Psalms 142, Proverbs 17:24-25

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 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.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 8:1-9:13, Acts 16:16-40, Psalms 143, Proverbs 17:26

June 25, 2019
CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Readings for today: 2 Kings 8:1-9:13, Acts 16:16-40, Psalms 143, Proverbs 17:26

“And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.” (Acts 16:20-21)

The gospel is disruptive. It confronts as much as it comforts. It stirs up as much as it calms down. It incites conflict as much as it brings peace. The Bible calls it a “two-edged sword.” Jesus warns us it will cause division. Setting family members against one another. Good friends. Whole communities. It forces us to face ourselves. Face our fears. Face our failures. It forces us to make a choice between Jesus and Self. Submission or sedition. Surrender or rebellion.

Preaching. Teaching. Living the gospel will set you at odds with our culture today. One could easily reframe the verse above to say, “And when they had brought them to the judge, they said, “These people are Christians and they are disturbing our city. They advocate a way of life that is bigoted, hateful, deceptive, and not lawful for us as Americans to accept or practice.” The Bible commands us to deny ourselves. Our culture celebrates Self as the new god. The Bible condemns greed, pride, lust, and ambition. Our culture monetizes them. The Bible teaches us to surrender and submit. Our culture teaches us to resist and rebel. The Bible demands that we love our enemies. Our culture demands that we demonize them. The Bible roots human freedom in the practice of forgiveness and grace. Our culture enslaves through rage, anger, and vengeance.

Paul is on his way to pray. He soon notices a young woman following him. She lives in terrible torment. Oppressed and possessed by demons. She is enslaved. Rather than care for her, her community uses her for monetary gain. They pay her to divine the future and her owners reap the profits. Then one day she meets Paul. She can’t help herself. There’s something about him that is different. Attractive. So she follows him around for days. The evil spirit lurking within her recognizes the Spirit of Christ that lives in Paul. She starts shouting to all who would hear her, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” Perhaps wanting to keep a lower profile, Paul finally gets exacerbated and casts the demon out. Now the trouble begins. Her owners have just lost their business. A significant source of their revenue. And Paul is just one man. What will happen if Christianity sweeps the city? Won’t it turn their whole world upside down?

Make no mistake. The gospel is personal but it is not private. It impacts communities, villages, towns, cities, and nations. It influences politics and societal norms. Paul will later tell the Corinthians that the gospel tears down everything that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. He will tell the Romans that the gospel is the power of God. And this same power is alive and well even today. The gospel confronts how we think about human sexuality. Wealth accumulation. The projection of military power. The gospel confronts how we think about the crisis on the border. The rise of white nationalism. The way we weaponize false information and lies to our own political benefit. The gospel confronts how we think about the environment. Family systems. The value of human life from the womb to the tomb. In short, the gospel penetrates and permeates every corner of society seeking to reshape and reform to the glory of God.

What difference does the gospel make in your life? In your relationships? In the way you vote? In the public policies you support? In the candidates you endorse? Where has the gospel disrupted you? Where is it currently challenging you? What implications does this hold for the way you live? “Do not be conformed to the patterns of this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2)

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 9:14-10:31, Acts 17, Psalms 144, Proverbs 17:27-28

June 26, 2019
EVANGELISM

Readings for today: 2 Kings 9:14-10:31, Acts 17, Psalms 144, Proverbs 17:27-28

I teach evangelism and mission at Denver Seminary once or twice a year and always spend time unpacking this text from Acts. Paul's defense of the gospel in Athens is brilliant and a great model for us as we engage our culture. Remember, 1 Peter 3:15 encourages us to "always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that lies within." As Christians, we should live "questionable lives" or lives of such holiness and devotion that they naturally elicit questions from the people around us who do not yet believe. The Apostle Paul certainly lived such a life and often had to give a defense for what he believed to angry mobs, kings and princes, and the Athenian court on the Aeropagus.

Paul is not engaging in a simple religious debate. This is not just any philosophical discussion. Paul has been dragged before the Athenian court to answer for the beliefs he is espousing. Religion was no joke in the ancient world. They truly believed the gods were engaged in their world and ending up on their bad side resulted in real life consequences. Paul also believes God is engaged with His world and refusing to believe the gospel holds real life consequences. So what we are watching unfold in Acts 17 is a trial. Paul is fighting for his life as well as for the hearts of those who are listening.

Note how Paul begins with an affirmation. He complements the Athenians on their religious devotion. Their city is filled with shrines to every god imaginable. They truly do want to please the gods which is a good thing and a great place to build common ground. He further connects with them around a particular shrine to the "unknown god." The Athenians were so worried about leaving one of the pantheon of gods out that they built a shrine to any gods that were not yet known. And Paul uses this shrine as a springboard to preach the gospel. Let me tell you the name of this unknown God. Let me share with you about His nature and character. Let me reveal to you who He is and what He's about. He is the God of gods. The Lord of heaven and earth. A God with no rival or peer. He cannot be depicted in idols of wood, stone, or precious metal. He cannot be housed in a temple or shrine. He cannot be served by a cult of priests. He needs nothing from us and yet gives everything to us. And through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, He has revealed Himself to us and called us to faith and repentance. As I said before, it's a brilliant argument that the Athenians clearly appreciated even if they didn't necessarily agree. So Paul is released. New converts are made. He moves on to the next city and assignment.

Are you prepared to give a defense of the gospel? Are you ready to give an answer for the hope that lies within? Do you share your faith in Christ with those around you? Do you live a "questionable" life before them? What would you say if someone asked you about Jesus? How would you describe your God to them? What would happen if you were dragged into court and forced to give an answer much like Andrew Brunson was recently in Turkey? Could you make a defense and how would you do it? Times are changing. Persecution is coming. The day is drawing near when holding fast to Biblical faith will be difficult. Jobs will be lost. Accusations will be made. Doors will be shut. What are you doing right now to prepare for the day when you are commanded to give an answer for why you believe?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 10:32-12:21, Acts 18:1-22, Psalms 145, Proverbs 18:1

June 27, 2019
HIGH PLACES

Readings for today: 2 Kings 10:32-12:21, Acts 18:1-22, Psalms 145, Proverbs 18:1

High places. We see them pop up all over the place in the Kings. 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 forbade 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.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 13-14, Acts 18:23-19:12, Psalms 146, Proverbs 18:2-3

June 28, 2019
THE STEADFAST LOVE OF GOD

Readings for today: 2 Kings 13-14, Acts 18:23-19:12, Psalms 146, Proverbs 18:2-3

As I read our text for today, I find myself continually struck by the tragic pattern I see 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. God grieves over all He has made and executes His righteous judgment. Humanity drowns. Languages are confused and the people scatter. Enemies oppress and enslave. All so that we might turn our hearts again towards God in repentance.

The time of the kings is no different. Good kings turn their hearts towards God and the people are blessed. Evil kings do what is right in their own eyes and they suffer. God sends prophets like Elijah and Elisha to call them to repentance but they are largely ignored. Finally, God sends judgment. He raises up adversaries both within and without Israel. Rebellion. War. Death. Kings are murdered. Families are decimated. God's righteous wrath over their sin on terrible display.

Humanity never changes. No matter how much "progress" we make technologically, scientifically, culturally, intellectually, you name it...we remain morally depraved. Our hearts are hard towards God. Our necks are stiff. We refuse to bend the knee. The world around us is still awash in injustice and violence. We simply cannot escape our corrupt human nature. Our will to power. Our lust for pleasure. Our craving for wealth. The Bible's diagnosis is incisive and true. "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." (Romans 3:10-12) And just when it seems like all is lost. The end is near. There is no hope. God relents. God reaches out. God intervenes once more.

"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." (2 Kings 13:23) 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. 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) Great is Thy faithfulness! Lord, unto me.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 15-16, Acts 19: 13-41, Psalms 147, Proverbs 18:4-5

June 29, 2019
A SOCIAL/POLITICAL GOSPEL

Readings for today: 2 Kings 15-16, Acts 19: 13-41, Psalms 147, Proverbs 18:4-5

Why can't the preacher just stick to the gospel? Why does he or she have to bring politics into the equation? Or social justice? Or economics? As my southern friends used to say, "Stick to preachin'! Stay away from meddlin'!" I hear this all the time from colleagues. Friends. Parishioners. The problem with this approach is clear when you read passages like the one for today. We've already seen how the early Christians were accused of "turning the world upside down" with their preaching. Simply put, it is impossible to separate the preaching of the gospel from the implications of the gospel. Preaching Jesus, by definition, challenges our notions of justice, power, race, sexual identity, social class, economics, etc. because He Himself challenged those same things through His preaching and ministry.

Ephesus was one of the great cities of Asia Minor in the 1st century. A commercial trading center. A major port. In the early second century, the great library of Celsus was built here, housing over 12,000 scrolls and putting Ephesus on the map alongside Alexandria as a center of learning. It had an amphitheater that held over 25,000 spectators. But perhaps the greatest draw was the famed Temple of Artemis. One of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Pilgrims came from all over to pay their respects to the great goddess. As a result, tradesmen and craftsmen made a lot of money supporting the cult by selling idols and little shrines for the people to carry home with them. Enter the Apostle Paul. He comes preaching a gospel of a God not made with human hands. A God who cannot be represented by idols here on earth. A God who is the maker of heaven and earth. A God greater than Artemis (the moon goddess) and many of her former adherents came to faith. Sales drop. Profits crumble. Money is lost. A riot ensues as the entire economic structure of the city is now threatened.

Such accusations are nothing new to Paul. He's already been accused of preaching a "king other than Caesar" which results in accusations of treason and sedition. They've heard him preach that in Christ, "there is no slave nor free, Jew nor Greek, male nor female" which upends entire social systems and ways of life. He's been accused of blasphemy by his fellow Jews for preaching Jesus as the Messiah. No wonder he'll remark to his Corinthians friends, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." (2 Corinthians 4:8-10) Paul understands to preach the gospel places one at odds with the social systems of this world. The economic systems of this world. The political systems of this world. That's because the gospel is the good news of another Kingdom. A Kingdom that is in this world but not of this world. A Kingdom ruled from a heavenly throne not an earthly one. A Kingdom driven by eternal values not temporal ones. A Kingdom that is pure and noble and righteous. Unwilling to compromise with the sinful and broken ways of this world. So one cannot preach without meddlin' in politics, social systems, economics, and justice. The gospel cannot be privatized. Jesus will not rest until He is Lord over every facet of human existence. Until every knee will bow in heaven. On earth. Under the earth. And every tongue confess that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 17:1-18:12, Acts 20, Psalms 148, Proverbs 18:6-7

June 30, 2019
READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: 2 Kings 17:1-18:12, Acts 20, Psalms 148, Proverbs 18:6-7

Readings for TOMORROW: 2 Kings 18:13-19:37, Acts 21:1-17, Psalms 149, Proverbs 18:8