

BIBLE IN A YEAR

BIBLE, FOLLOWING JESUS, DISCIPLESHIP

2019

STUDY AND COMMENTARY

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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July 1, 2019
THE DANGERS OF IDOLATRY

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

A few years ago, I was having a conversation with one of my children who was asking me about a friend of hers who was struggling. She was depressed. Anxious. Afraid. Lonely. Being bullied at school. I asked about her faith. Did she believe in Jesus Christ? No, came the answer. But she does pray. She is a spiritual person. She believes in a personal spirit animal. I asked if she'd prayed to the spirit animal about her struggles? Yes. All the time. But nothing happens? That's right. Could it be that nothing happens because there is no such thing as a spirit animal? Could it be that she's worshiping something that doesn't exist and is therefore completely unable to help? Might the answer she's looking for be found in Jesus Christ? And are you willing to talk to her about Him? It was a great conversation. Hard but good. Heartbreaking to hear all this young woman was going through but hopeful because my child now had the opportunity to share Christ with her.

Today's reading highlights an important truth. We live in a religiously pluralistic world. A world full of all sorts of gods and goddesses. A world that is growing more religious by most measures. A world full of competing ideologies and worldviews. A world full of idols. Such has always been the case. In Hezekiah's time, every tribe had their own god. They worshiped their gods. Sacrificed to their gods. Served their gods. In return, their gods were supposed to provide for them. Protect them. Give them victory over enemies. So when a nation like Assyria invaded, the battle wasn't just between kings and armies but between the gods they served. If Assyria won, their god was more powerful. If they lost, their god was weak. "Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you out of my hand. Do not let Hezekiah make you trust in the Lord by saying, The Lord will surely deliver us, and this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria...And do not listen to Hezekiah when he misleads you by saying, "The Lord will deliver us." Has any of the gods of the nations ever delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?" (2 Kings 18:29-35)

Assyria has established their dominance. Their god has thus far proved more powerful than the tribal gods of the other nations. But the Assyrians have misplaced their trust. They believe in idols. Gods who are not gods. Further, their victories are hollow because the nations they have conquered also worship false gods. Now things are different. Now they have come up against the one true and living God of the universe. The One who reigns in glory high above the heavens. The One who directs the affairs of all men. Hezekiah doesn't need his army. He doesn't need chariots and horses. The Lord is on his side and it is enough. "And Hezekiah prayed before the Lord and said: "O Lord, the God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. Incline your ear, O Lord, and hear; open your eyes, O Lord, and see; and hear the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. Truly, O Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. So now, O Lord our God, save us, please, from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O Lord, are God alone." (2 Kings 19:15-19)

We often fall into the trap of believing as long as someone is spiritual, it's enough. As long as someone worships something – call it whatever – it is enough. As long as they acknowledge the existence of a deity on some level it is enough. It's different names for the same reality. Like the "COEXIST" bumper stickers you see on the back of cars. But that's simply not true. Allah and Yahweh are not the same. Muhammed and Jesus are not the same. Christians worship a different God than our Muslim, Mormon, Jehovah's Witness, Hindu, and Buddhist friends. Biblically speaking, they worship false gods and their false worship has consequences. Their gods cannot answer them when they cry out. Their gods cannot heal. Cannot comfort. Cannot provide. Cannot protect because they do not exist. As Hezekiah points out in his prayer, "They were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and

stone.” We might put it this way in our time, “They are no gods but the work of men’s imaginations, crafted and created to serve our own purposes.”

This was the point I was making to my daughter. Our faith is not a matter of opinion. It doesn’t rest on sincerity or how strongly we hold to our convictions. Our faith is real because it trusts in a God who is real. Who is alive. Who reigns and rules from heaven even now. Who is with us. Who’s Spirit dwells in the heart of every believer. Who hears our prayers. Who breaks through time and space to work miracles on our behalf. Who actually came to earth. Walked among us. Taught us the ways of His Kingdom. Who suffered and died on our behalf. Who rose again. These aren’t just philosophical truths we believe but historical facts that undergird our faith in a way that sets us apart from all others.

I don’t know what you are dealing with today. The challenges you face. The burdens you carry. I don’t know what your friends and loved ones are struggling with but I encourage you to pray the prayer Hezekiah prayed. “O Lord our God, save us that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the Lord.”

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 20:1-22:2, Acts 21:18-36, Psalms 150, Proverbs 18:9-10

July 2, 2019
LEADERSHIP

Readings for today: 2 Kings 20:1-22:2, Acts 21:18-36, Psalms 150, Proverbs 18:9-10

Last July, I had the privilege of visiting Rwanda with my wife and serving with the great folks at Hope Haven school outside of Kigali. Many may remember the terrible genocide that took place in the 1990's as over one million Tutsi's were killed in 100 days by their Hutu friends and neighbors. While we were there, we visited the National Genocide Museum. Spending time at the mass graves of over 250,000 people was sobering to say the least. A national trauma survey by UNICEF estimates that 80% of Rwandan children experienced a death in their family in 1994. 70% witnessed someone being killed or injured and 90% believed they would die. How can such a thing happen?

Leadership. An unholy alliance between the racist government of Juvenal Habyarimana and the "Hutu Power" promoting media run by Hassan Ngeze combined to create the conditions whereby such a horror was possible. Aided and abetted by the French government who supplied them arms and training, the government worked hard to gain control over the country as they prepared to implement their own version of Hitler's "Final Solution." As the international community turned their backs on Rwanda, evil was allowed to flourish and the results were beyond tragic.

Such leaders are not unknown in the Scriptures. Manasseh reigned for over fifty years and in that time, "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel." (2 Kings 21:2) He re-instituted pagan idol worship, rebuilding the high places his father had torn down. He defiled the Temple by setting up altars to foreign gods. "And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord. And he burned his son as an offering and used fortune-telling and omens and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger." (2 Kings 21:5-6) In short, he did more evil in reign than all the kings who had come before him and after he died, his son Ammon continued in his ways. It was the darkest period in the southern kingdom's history, the people were led astray, and the eventual result was judgment as God sends the Babylonians in to lay waste to Judah.

All of us are leaders. Leadership begins with self. Learning to control our thoughts and desires and channel them to godly action. Leadership continues in the family. We lead our families as fathers and mothers and teach our children to walk in God's ways. We lead at work as we use our influence – whether supervisor or employee - to impact the health and well-being of others and our organization's future. We lead at church by the way we worship and serve our brothers and sisters in Christ. We lead in every sphere of life so here's the critical question...what kind of leader are you? When the final analysis is in and the impact of your life is measured, will it be for good or for evil in the eyes of the Lord?

Everything rises and falls on leadership. President Paul Kagame could see what was happening in his country. He saw the signs and he began to organize a resistance. He led a rebellion against the racist government and national media and, as a result, saved tens of thousands of lives. He is rightfully called a hero. But his leadership didn't stop there. He has worked hard to re-integrate the country. Establishing Unity and Reconciliation commissions where wrongs can be redressed, crimes confessed, forgiveness offered, and entire communities restored. This is his greatest accomplishment. Like Nelson Mandela before him, he refuses to allow hate to drive his leadership and his nation is reaping the benefits.

Everything rises and falls on leadership. How are you doing?

Readings for today: 2 Kings 22:3-23:30, Acts 21:37-22:16, Psalms 1, Proverbs 18:11-12

July 3, 2019
WALKING IN THE COUNSEL OF GOD

Readings for today: 2 Kings 22:3-23:30, Acts 21:37-22:16, Psalms 1, Proverbs 18:11-12

“Blessed is the one who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers...”

Cable news. Twitter feeds. Facebook posts. Instagram stories. YouTube video channels. Newspapers. Google. Email. Texts. Snapchats. Every day, we are immersed in a sea of information. Most of it reflecting the “counsel of the wicked.” Most of it promoting the “way of sinners.” Most of it beckoning us to “sit in the seat of scoffers.” We cannot escape it. We cannot ignore it. We cannot insulate ourselves against it. It shapes our hearts and minds. It squeezes us into the world’s mode. It’s why we find ourselves so anxious and depressed and afraid. It’s why we find ourselves turning to the ways of the world to get our way. Accumulate power and wealth and influence and control. We want to stay safe. We want to be secure. We want to remain comfortable. We believe we deserve it.

There is another way. The way of the righteous. The one who takes counsel with the Lord. Who follows the way of Christ. Who sits down at the feet of his or her God. “His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.” Does this image reflect your life? Is God’s Word your delight? Do you meditate on it day and night? Is your life like a flowering tree? Yielding the fruit of blessing for those around you? Your family? Friends? Co-workers? Neighbors? Have you prospered spiritually? Have your grown in wisdom and knowledge and honor as you’ve walked in faithfulness to Jesus?

“The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.” The wicked are easily identified. They live for themselves. They pursue pleasure. They satisfy every desire. They do not submit their lives to Christ. On the contrary, they reject the existence of God. They recognize no authority but their own. They chase unfettered freedom only to find slavery. They live lives of quiet desperation. Struggling with despair, depression, and thoughts of self-destruction. Such is the way of the wicked which is why they are like the chaff the wind blows away. Does your life have substance to it? Eternal weight and glory? Is it full of meaning and purpose or is it empty and void?

This is why “the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” God will not be mocked. He will not allow our rebellion to stand. He will put an end to our stubbornness and pride once and for all. We will face His judgment for He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. His will reigns supreme over all He has made. We ignore Him at our peril. We take counsel against Him at our own risk. We are fools to reject Him.

Friends, God is calling you home. No matter how far you have wandered. No matter how long it has been. No matter how dark things have gotten. God is offering you His counsel. He invites you into His Presence. He longs to speak with you and share with you His heart for your life. His great desire is that you would thrive. You would become that tree planted by streams of living water. Branches overflowing with fruit. Leaves in full bloom. Turn off the technology. Turn off the television. Put aside the newspapers. Pick up God’s Word. Let Him fill you with His wisdom. Then you will prosper in all that you do.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 23:31-25:30, Acts 22:17-23:10, Psalms 2, Proverbs 18:13

July 4, 2019
A BLESSED NATION

Readings for today: 2 Kings 23:31-25:30, Acts 22:17-23:10, Psalms 2, Proverbs 18:13

“Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.” (Psalms 2:10-12)

Today is the 4th of July. Many of us will be celebrating with friends and family and great food. Meme's will be shared all over social media thanking God for our country and the men and women who've given their lives to serve and protect the values we hold dear. The night sky will light up with “rockets red glare and bombs bursting in mid-air.” Our hearts will fill with pride and joy and patriotism as we commemorate the national day of Independence in the United States.

At the same time, we need to be honest with ourselves. We should endeavor to celebrate our nation's history with eyes wide open. As we rightfully honor the men and women who've served in uniform, we should also honor those men and women who staged sit-ins and refused to move to the back of the bus. As we remember those who paid the ultimate price defending our freedoms, we should lament those who paid a similar price on our southern border seeking the dream of a better life for their children. As we remember those patriots who forged this nation, we should take time to listen to those they displaced for these were not virgin shores we landed on all those years ago.

Today's reading provides a warning to those with ears to hear. Kings and rulers, presidents and politicians ignore God at their own peril and endanger the nations they lead. God calls us to wisdom and the beginning of wisdom is the “fear of the Lord” according to Scripture. If God will not spare His own people, why do we think He will spare us? If God will send Assyria and Babylon to execute His judgment on Israel, why do we think we are exempt? If God will raze the very Temple where He dwelled to the ground and destroy the city that bears His name, why do we think singing “God bless America” will protect us?

Our future as a nation rests in God's hands. He alone is the arbiter of our fate. Any nation that claims His blessing must walk in His ways. Any nation that claims His protection must submit to His will. Any nation that claims a Christian heritage must demonstrate it in the way they live, the way they love, and the way they serve.

Friends, we have reached a critical point in history. We have given into the politics of hate and fear. We have turned difference into division. Our fellow citizens have become our mortal enemies. We are being torn apart from within. The only hope we have is to repent. Repent of our arrogance and pride. Repent of our selfishness and greed. Repent of our privilege and prejudice. We must repent and return to the Lord with our whole hearts. We must acknowledge that our greatness as a nation is a byproduct of our faithfulness to Christ. It is only as we lose our lives as a nation for Christ's sake that we will find Him granting us an abundant life full of joy and peace. It is only as we give all we have as a nation in service to Him that we will find riches beyond measure. It is only as we lay our lives down as a nation for the most vulnerable in our world that we will once again find God shedding His grace on us and making America truly great. This is the call of the gospel and it is as much a mandate for nations as it is for individuals.

My prayer today is that we will be wise as a nation. We will take heed of God's warning. We will lay aside the hate. Lay aside the lust for power. Lay aside the need for control. Instead, may we serve the Lord with fear. Rejoice with trembling over all He has done. I pray for our leadership from the President to the members of Congress to the Supreme Court justices. From governors to state legislators to local mayors and town councils. May they embrace Jesus. May they kiss the Son before it's too late. May they seek refuge in Him, have the courage to walk by faith, and the humility to be led in paths of righteousness for His Name's sake. To whom much is given, much is expected. May our nation strive to be the “city on a hill” and a “light to the nations” so that our world will be blessed!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 1:1-2:17, Acts 23:11-35, Psalms 3, Proverbs 18:14-15

July 5, 2019
GOD'S SALVATION

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 1:1-2:17, Acts 23:11-35, Psalms 3, Proverbs 18:14-15

I've been reading the sermons of Dr. Gardner Taylor, considered one of the greatest African-American preachers of the last century, recently during my devotional time. This morning, I ran across this gem. "No matter the reason, every man (or woman) has his Gethsemane and his Calvary." It reminded me of the utter despair David must have felt when Absalom betrayed him. Absalom, you may remember, murdered his brother to avenge his sister who had been raped. He fled from the king's presence out fear for his own life. The brokenness that ensues divides the kingdom and eventually results in a civil war. Through it all, David never stops loving his son which makes the betrayal even harder to bear. As David flees for his own life, he pens these heartbreakingly words...

"O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying of my soul, "There is no salvation for him in God." (Psalms 3:1-2)

David felt abandoned. Alone. Overwhelmed. And yet, in the midst of his fear and anxiety, he turns to God. "But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head. I cried aloud to the Lord, and he answered me from his holy hill. I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the Lord sustained me. I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around. Arise, O Lord! Save me, O my God! For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked. Salvation belongs to the Lord; your blessing be on your people" (Psalms 3:3-8) David knew God was with him. No matter where he went. No matter how far he had to run. No matter how high the odds were stacked against him. God would deliver him. God would protect him. God would save him.

It's important to note there are no guarantees in this Psalm. David never asks for his kingdom. Never asks for his family to be restored. Never asks for things to go back to the way they were before. His hope is not in his circumstances. His hope is in the Lord. And David trusts God with his future. He knows God will be faithful to work things according to His good will and pleasure.

The key to maintaining your faith in the midst of adversity is to release the outcome to God. Trust Him with your future whatever that may be. Humble yourself before Him. Do not presume on His grace. David had made some mistakes along the way. He bore some responsibility for the situation he found himself in. There are no victims in this story. Both Absalom and David are at fault. Both have sinned. Both will face the consequences of their actions. At the same time, only one turns back to the Lord in repentance. Only one seeks the face of God in humility. Only one gives his life back into God's hands.

I love how Dr. Taylor puts it in his sermon, "We can bring any mood before God, so long as we cling to our integrity of soul. When all of this is said, the ultimate cry of higher religion must ever be though He slay me, yet will I serve Him." This is the truth David knew and believed. Though God take the kingdom away from him. Though lifelong alliances breakdown and friends become mortal enemies. Though he lose all his wealth and power and privilege...yet will David serve Him. Yet will David trust in Him. Yet will David turn to Him in repentance and faith. This is why David can cry out to God from the depths of his being. This is why David can bring before God his deepest hurts and heartbreak. He knows God will listen. He knows God will answer. And he trusts God with the result.

What about you? Do you trust God with your life? Do you trust God to direct your steps wherever they may lead? Do you trust God with the outcome? Do you believe God has your best in mind even though it may not look anything like what you once thought? When you go through hardship and struggle and pain, do you resent God? Do you feel you deserve more? Like God's somehow not lived up to His end of the bargain? Follow David's example. Turn to Christ. Trust in Christ. Repent and believe in Christ. He will listen. He will answer. He will save.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 2:18-4:4, Acts 24, Psalms 4, Proverbs 18:16-18

July 6, 2019
PEACE

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 2:18-4:4, Acts 24, Psalms 4, Proverbs 18:16-18

We live in an anxious world. More and more people are suffering from anxiety disorders, depression, self-harm, and even suicide. There is something desperately wrong with the pace and rhythm of our lives. Something desperately wrong about the goals we are pursuing. We chase wealth and fame and success. We make idols out of youth and physical beauty. We seek to satisfy every sexual desire. But we are not happy. We are not content. We are not at peace. In fact, we are more anxious than ever.

The Psalmist teaches us a better way. "In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety." (Psalms 4:8) King David has everything a person could ever want. He holds the power of life and death in his hands. He has wealth beyond measure. He is famous and beloved by his people. He truly can do whatever his heart desires. But he does not look for peace from any of these things. He seeks it from the Lord.

How have you been sleeping lately? Do you dream at night? Is your rest deep and peaceful? Or do you find yourself struggling with insomnia. Struggling to sleep more than a few hours at a time. Is your sleep plagued by nightmares? Anxious thoughts that take on a life of their own as soon as you close your eyes? Does your pace cause you to skip out on sleep? Try to get by on four to five hours a night? Let me gently suggest you are heading for a crash. You are trying to live according to your own strength. You are pursuing the ways of this world which will eventually result in pain and suffering if it hasn't already.

David understood stress. He carried the weight of a nation on his shoulders. Though beloved by his people, he definitely had his enemies. He begins his prayer by crying out to God for help. "Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness! You have given me relief when I was in distress. Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!" His enemies spread lies about him. They are actively trying to tear him down. Question his authority. Question his integrity. Question his honor. "O men, how long shall my honor be turned into shame? How long will you love vain words and seek after lies?" David acknowledges his frustration but claims the promises of God. He knows the Lord preserves the righteous. He understands God has His hand on those who fear Him. God will be with him to protect him and guide him. He will hear David's prayer and respond. "But know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself; the Lord hears when I call to him. Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent." This is why David can sleep in peace. He knows he doesn't have to take matters into his own hands. God is in control. God commands his destiny. God determines when he wakes and when he sleeps. God has raised him up to his position and God will preserve his life as king.

Do you live with the same faith? The same trust in the Lord? In the midst of all your fears and anxieties and stress and struggles, do you continue to worship God? Do you trust in His Word? Do you listen for His voice and His affirmation more than you do the affirmation of those around you? Is the joy of the Lord your strength? Listen again to David's words, "Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord. There are many who say, "Who will show us some good? Lift up the light of your face upon us, O Lord!" You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound." (Psalms 4:5-7)

Friends, God wants you to experience peace. He wants you to rest secure in the knowledge that He loves you. Delights in you. Treasures you. You are His child. Bought with the precious blood of His Only Begotten Son. He will protect you. He will provide for you. He will never turn His face from you. His joy is worth more than any wealth you can accumulate. Any success you can achieve. Any fame you can gain. Place your trust in Christ today and find the deep satisfaction your soul longs for!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 4:5-5:17, Acts 25, Psalms 5, Proverbs 18:19

July 7, 2019
THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 4:5-5:17, Acts 25, Psalms 5, Proverbs 18:19

Why is there so much evil in the world? And what is God doing about it? These are questions the people of God have been struggling with for millennia. We know God is good. We know God is love. We know God is all-powerful and omniscient. We know God sees all things. We know nothing is hidden from his sight. So why then does He allow evil to exist? Why does He not step in and destroy the works of the devil? Why does He not step in to end suffering? Why does He not step in to defeat those who would commit such terrible crimes?

The history of humanity is replete with violence and suffering and unimaginable evil. The Holocaust. Stalin's purges. The killing fields of Pol Pot. Massacres under Mao Tse-Tung. The systematic killing of our own native population and the subjugation of an entire race of people for hundreds of years in America. The list seems endless. Consider the millions of babies who've been aborted. The inhumane treatment of those on our southern border. The rise of white nationalism in recent years. Human progress is a myth. Add to this the personal evil we commit against one another. Harsh words. Betrayal. Hurt. Anger. Gossip. Slander. Abandonment. All leading to deeply broken relationships. All of us have known evil. All of us have seen evil. All of us have experienced evil.

David had seen evil as well. He had been attacked by bloodthirsty men. Slandered by those who hated him. Put down by the boastful who envied his rise to power. He knew they were liars. Full of deceit. Not to be trusted. And yet their words stung. Their attacks drew blood. He had been hurt, wounded, and betrayed. How did David respond? He cried out to God. "Give ear to my words, O Lord; consider my groaning. Give attention to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you do I pray. O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch. For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you. The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man." (Psalms 5:1-6) David placed his trust in God alone. He put himself in God's hands. He believed God's justice would win out in the end.

Furthermore, David understood he was not clean. He was not pure. He was just as capable of great evil as anyone. He approached God clothed not in his own righteousness but trusting in His love and grace. "But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you...But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy, and spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may exult in you. For you bless the righteous, O Lord; you cover him with favor as with a shield." (Psalms 5:7, 11-12) God was David's refuge. God's steadfast love was David's hope. God's righteousness was David's shield. For all his failings, David feared God. He sought protection in the shadow of His wings.

What about you? You and I are both victim and perpetrator. We are innocent and we are guilty. We are capable of great good and capable of great evil. We are not clean. We are not pure. We are not righteous. Given enough power. Given enough wealth. Given enough influence. Who knows what evil we would do? Who knows what corruption would come out? The key for all of us is to follow David's example. Take refuge in God. Cover yourself in Christ's righteousness. Humble yourself before Him. Fear Him and walk in His ways. As we do this individually and as we do this communally, we will see light push back darkness. Love overcome hate. Good defeat evil. As God puts His righteousness on display in and through us for the sake of the world.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 15:18-6:81, Acts 26, Psalms 6, Proverbs 18:20-21

July 8, 2019
GODLY SORROW

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 15:18-6:81, Acts 26, Psalms 6, Proverbs 18:20-21

Repentance is a very important word for the Christian. It formed the heart of Jesus' preaching. It represents a clarion call to a new way of life. It necessitates a radical break with the old so the new may emerge. Sadly, I find too many Christians do not understand this word much less seek to embrace it in their daily lives.

Repentance begins with godly sorrow. An overwhelming feeling of guilt over how far we have fallen short of the glory of God. It is the heart-shattering awareness of our sin. The depths of our depravity. Coming to grips with the idolatry of our lives. John Calvin once said, "our hearts are idol factories." I agree and would only add that the assembly line never stops running. We are in constant conflict with ourselves. Refusing to bow the knee. Refusing to submit. Refusing to surrender our lives to the Lordship of Christ.

David lived with a deep awareness of his sin. This man after God's own heart was broken just like all of us. He was not perfect. He was not holy. He was not righteous. He held no corner on the truth. He was unfaithful. He was unforgiving. He was violent and vengeful. But David did have one thing going for him that was his saving grace. He repented. Over and over again. Throughout the course of his life. Whenever he was confronted, he fell on his knees in godly sorrow over what he had done. This is why God loved him so much. A broken and contrite heart God will never despise.

I do not meet many Christians who grieve over their sin. The whole idea of guilt and shame is a non-starter in our world. In fact, our culture would have us believe that any feelings of guilt and shame are not good for our mental health. Instead, we should live in constant affirmation of all we think, say, and do. If anyone hurts us, we should cut them out of our lives. They are "toxic" and not worth our time. If we hurt others, we blame-shift and self-justify. In short, we will do anything to avoid true repentance. Fundamentally, this is why so many churches have cut any kind of "confessional prayer" out of their weekly worship services because we don't want people to feel bad about themselves.

However, the biblical truth is that we all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. All of us have wandered and gone astray like sheep without a shepherd. All of us naturally rebel against the Law of God. All of us are sinners in desperate need of grace. This fundamental truth should undo us. It should cut us to the heart. It should grip our souls. We should grieve and shed tears over our broken condition. I love how David puts it, "O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath...I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eye wastes away because of grief; it grows weak because of all my foes." (Psalms 6:1, 6-7) David understands his hopeless and defenseless position before a perfectly Holy God. He knows unless God chooses to show him grace that he is lost. So he cries out in godly sorrow for God to have mercy. He cries out for forgiveness. And God answers him. "The Lord has heard my plea; the Lord accepts my prayer." (Psalms 6:9)

When was the last time you cried out to God? When was the last time you confessed your sins? When was the last time you reflected on the utter helplessness of your broken spiritual condition? Yes, God is quick to forgive. Yes, God is quick to show grace. Yes, God is merciful but only to those who repent. Only to those who humbly acknowledge their sin. Only those who come to grips with the sheer depths of their sin will ever come to fully appreciate the magnitude of God's amazing grace.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 7-8, Acts 27:1-20, Psalms 7, Proverbs 18:22

July 9, 2019
ROOTLESS

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 7-8, Acts 27:1-20, Psalms 7, Proverbs 18:22

I have an ancestral home. If you go to the cemetery in the tiny town of Wauneta just off old route 6 in western Nebraska, you will find a bunch of people I'm related to. My parents will be buried there near my grandparents. I have aunts and uncles and a host of cousins buried there as well. We can still go by the home where I spent a lot of time in the summers bouncing on the trampoline. Eating great food. Helping out with the harvest. We can drive by the old feedlot operation. We can run through the pastures where we played "cowpatty softball." We can go out to the land we still own and dig our hands into the dirt. Whenever I visit, I can feel my roots. They run pretty deep in this place. It gives me a sense of security. A groundedness. I know where I have come from. I know the family I've come from. I know my lineage. I know the legacy that's been passed down good, bad and ugly.

Most people these days don't have roots. They are two or three generations removed from their ancestral lands. They might be able to find their hometown on a map but have never been there. They are nomadic. Moving from place to place. Sure, they always make new friends but it's nothing like living in the same community for generations. When the people around you remember your grandfather and grandmother or your parents when they were little or they taught your aunts and uncles in school, you become truly and deeply known. Known in a way that is disconcerting at times. Small towns are notorious for everyone being in everyone else's business! At the same time, being known like this provides a sense of safety and security as well.

Why read through the genealogies of the Bible? Who cares who's descended from whom and how many brothers and sisters they may have had? We can hardly pronounce the names much less understand why they're listed here in such great detail. Genealogies were vital to the ancient Israelite. It was how you were known. "Oh, you're Tola? You must be Issachar's boy." "Oh, you're Saul? You must be from the tribe of Benjamin." Each family had a story. Each tribe a connection to the Promised Land. And these stories and connections are what gave each individual Israelite their identity.

Think about the world we live in right now. Think about how many people are searching for identity. A family or tribe to belong to. They may ground their identity in their race or ethnicity, sexuality, religious faith, professional expertise. They may ground their identity in life experiences or certain abilities/disabilities. Some of these roots run deeper than others. Sadly what's been lost in all this is any sense of connection to community. Any sense of rootedness in a story larger than ourselves. In fact, each generation seems more apt to reject their family identity in favor of one they construct for themselves. No wonder we live such anxious lives.

We are all nomads in a sense. All homeless in significant ways. Constantly searching but never finding. Constantly seeking but always lost. At first, the nomadic lifestyle appeals. Who doesn't want the unencumbered life? A life of unfettered freedom where you get to go where you want and do what you want? Gratify every desire. Chase every pleasure. It sounds wonderful until you actually try it. Pretty soon it loses its luster. Relationships are superficial and thin. It requires more and more to get that dopamine high. Pretty soon you start to feel anxious. Afraid. Alone. Life loses its meaning and purpose. We've lost any connection to our family story. We hold little appreciation or understanding for the generations who came before us and we certainly show little concern for the generations coming after us.

This is not what God intends. God created us for family. He created us to be part of His story. Part of this grand unfolding narrative of the Kingdom of God coming into this world. Each generation plays an important role. Each person has a unique part to play. Through faith in Jesus Christ, nomads come home. We find our place. Our people. A purpose greater than our own personal pleasure. God doesn't want you to wander. God refuses to let His children remain lost. He is relentless in His pursuit of those He loves and once He finds them, nothing can snatch them out of His hand. If you are a Christian, the Bible's story is your story. You are related by faith to every single name. Every single person. Every single generation listed. You are not an orphan. You are not alone. You have a home not made with human hands awaiting you in the heavens fashioned by God Himself. Let this truth sink in and ease any anxieties and fears you may have today.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 9-10, Acts 27:21-44, Psalms 8, Proverbs 18:23-24

July 10, 2019
EPITAPH

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 9-10, Acts 27:21-44, Psalms 8, Proverbs 18:23-24

In the final analysis, what message will your life send? What will be written about you after you die? What memories will your children and grandchildren hold onto? How will they speak of you? King Saul ruled Israel for a number of years. He started off well but quickly went off track. His life is one of half-measures. A part of him tries so hard to be faithful to God but a greater part keeps taking matters into his own hands. His fear gets the best of him on so many occasions. And now we read about his death. A horrible one. You can almost see him on top of Mt. Gilboa. Wounded. Pierced through by many arrows. The bodies of his sons lying on the ground around him. He's in pain. Agony. Grief-stricken. Israel has fallen before the Philistines. The glory of the Lord has departed. He's watching it all come crashing down around him and in his despair, he asks his armor-bearer to finish him off before his enemies come and torture him. His armor-bearer refuses so Saul falls on his own sword.

What verdict does the Bible render about this man's life? "So Saul died for his breach of faith. He broke faith with the Lord in that he did not keep the command of the Lord, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance. He did not seek guidance from the Lord. Therefore the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse." (1 Chronicles 10:13-14) Saul's death did not come at the hands of the Philistines. Not ultimately. His fate was sealed when he broke faith with God. When he did not wait all those years ago for Samuel to come and make the right sacrifices. From that point forward, Saul was doomed to perish and every action he took to stave off his fate only served to seal it further. Seeking out the witch of En-dor was simply the final straw that broke the camel's back. Saul no longer sought God. No longer pursued God. No longer loved God. And so God put him to death and gave the kingdom to David.

So back to us? What will future generations say about you when you're gone? The writers of the Chronicles were looking back at their history. They looked back at their leaders and they judged them primarily based on their fidelity to the Lord. Good leadership looks to Yahweh. Evil leadership looks to other gods. A good life is one defined by faithfulness to God. An evil life is one defined by selfishness, greed, and the worship of idols. Saul will forever be remembered by his epitaph in 1 Chronicles 10:13-14. David will forever be remembered as the "man after God's own heart." Who are you?

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 11:1-12:18, Acts 28, Psalms 9:1-12, Proverbs 19:1-3

July 11, 2019
COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 11:1-12:18, Acts 28, Psalms 9:1-12, Proverbs 19:1-3

“I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will recount all of your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.” (Psalms 9:1-2)

We live in a world full of hate. Anger. Rage. Violence. At least that's what the media would have us believe. They self-select stories based in no small part on the outrage they will generate. Social media platforms have become vents for bitterness. The amount of negativity we are exposed to on a daily basis is enormous. No wonder the “happiness index” in the United States continues to decline with each passing year. And yet the truth of the matter is this...there has never been a better time to be alive as a human being. Yes, some humans are better off than others but as a species overall, we are thriving by every measure. There has never been a safer time to be alive. Yes, some communities are safer than others but again, by every measure, because of advanced healthcare, human rights advocacy, etc., as a species we've never been more safe. Why then are we so anxious and afraid?

The Psalmist lived at a time of great insecurity. The ancient near east was full of violence, suffering, and pain. Food insecurity was an everyday reality for most people. Many babies died in childbirth. Medical care was non-existent. Human rights unknown. Days off, vacation, retirement were foreign concepts because you had to work every single day if you were going to survive. Layer in all the injustices of the ancient world and the harsh criminal codes. The periodic raids of foreign tribes. And the slavery and oppression one experienced should one be defeated in battle. It was a brutal time.

And yet the Psalmist finds a way to “thank God with his whole heart.” How in the world in the midst of all his turmoil, suffering, and pain. In the midst of his struggles, anxieties, and fears can he find the strength to thank God for his blessings? David is wise. He does not know the future. He lives with daily uncertainty. He's lived on the run. He's had to fight his way free from his enemies. He knows what it's like to face death. But David has also seen the salvation of God. He has seen God perform miracles and signs and wonders. Show up when all hope is lost. Snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Come to his rescue when things looked very bleak. And as he looks back on those events in his life, he finds his hope renewed. His joy restored. His confidence soars because he knows God is with him.

The simple act of counting your blessings on a regular basis is a powerful one. Looking back over the course of your life and reflecting not the many ways God has spoken to you. Revealed Himself to you. Saved you. Delivered you. Blessed you. I was talking to one of my children the other day. They struggle with anxiety and fear. Growing up has them frightened. They aren't sure they're going to make it. They were starting to spin out and get very negative and I simply asked them to count the blessings in their life. A great family. Good friends. A home to live in. Food to eat. A car to drive. A job that pays at least some of the bills. We talked about the many experiences they've had and the things they've seen. They've been on mission trips. They know those less fortunate live. They've seen suffering up close and personal.

The more we talked, the more encouraged they became. Pretty soon we were laughing and joking and talking about the future with little to no fear at all. When was the last time you sat down and counted the blessings in your life? Recounted all the things God has done for you over the course of your life? When was the last time you turned off cable news and took a break from social media? Intentionally shut down the doomsday voices of our culture so you could listen to the still, small voice of God? Take some time today and claim this promise for your life, “The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you.” (Psalms 9:9-10) God will never let you down.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 12:19-14:17, Romans 1:1-17, Psalms 9:13-20, Proverbs 19:4-5

July 12, 2019
THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 12:19-14:17, Romans 1:1-17, Psalms 9:13-20, Proverbs 19:4-5

You may have seen the news out of Europe about the Dutch man who tried to change his legal age. Biologically, he is in his sixties but he “feels” like he’s in his forties and his life is diminished because of the discrimination that happens the older one gets. You may have caught the news out of England about the man who believes passionately in “ethical veganism” and wants it to become legally protected as a religion so he can potentially force his former employer to give him his job back as well as change their investment practices so as not to violate his religious beliefs. You may have seen the opinion piece in the New York Times from the transgender woman who argues the medical ethical guideline of “Do no harm” no longer should apply because no doctor should ever have the authority to determine what actually “harms” another person. “I also believe that surgery’s only prerequisite should be a simple demonstration of want. Beyond this, no amount of pain, anticipated or continuing, justifies its withholding.” (Andrea Long Chu, NYT, 11/24/2018) These may seem like isolated cases to you. Outliers we should dismiss. I disagree.

I believe they are the prime examples of God giving us over to the “lusts of our hearts...dishonorable passions...debased minds.” Now please hear me. I am not being mean. I am not being judgmental. I am simply pointing out the reality of what happens when we turn away from God. We dis-integrate. Body, mind, heart, and soul are set in opposition to one another, resulting in skyrocketing rates of depression and suicide ideation. Dysphoria, once considered a mental illness, is now being celebrated and embraced. The Apostle Paul knew the tragic consequences of such thinking. It was celebrated in his own context as well. Human beings, created and designed to bring God glory and honor, turned from their sacred vocation and pursued their own pleasure. They did what was right in their own eyes. They forged their own path only to find it leading them over a cliff. The most heartbreak part of reading the New York Times story mentioned above was Andrea’s willingness, even desire, to embrace depression and suicide. She admits taking hormones and having surgery will actually take her deeper into depression but she sees no alternative. She has no hope.

This is why Paul’s stirring words in Romans 1:16 are so important! “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Make no mistake, Paul doesn’t believe the gospel is simply a good idea. One philosophy among many. One path among many to get to God. No, he truly believes the gospel provides the only ANSWER to the problem of pain and suffering of this world. He truly believes the gospel provides the only HOPE we can possibly have for a better, richer, more integrated life. He truly believes the gospel alone has the power to save humanity from itself.

Now I know this idea is very unpopular in our culture today. To suggest Christianity is somehow superior in any way to any other religious or philosophical idea is considered arrogant and condescending. Exclusive and intolerant. But let me put it another way. Imagine you develop a successful treatment for cancer. Imagine your success rate is 100% at curing the disease. Sure, there are a lot of other treatments out there. Some more successful than others but yours is guaranteed. Would it not be right to promote it as the better, more superior option? Paul believes the gospel is the power of God for salvation. He believes it actually delivers on what it promises. Is he not right then to promote it as the superior cure to what ails humanity? Namely, sin? Is he not right to promote it above the Torah? Are we not right to promote it above Islam? Hinduism? Buddhism? If we truly believe Jesus is God then how can we not declare Him as superior in every way to Mohammed, Krishna, Buddha, even Moses? Friends, this is exactly the truth that changed Paul’s life on the road outside Damascus. When he realized Jesus had been raised from the dead, he knew He could be no ordinary prophet. Jesus must be God and therefore everything Jesus said or did must be true. And if everything Jesus said or did must be true then we must believe Him. And if we believe Him then we will surrender our lives to Him. And if we surrender our lives to Him then we will be submit all our thoughts, feelings, and actions to His Lordship. And if we submit to His Lordship, we will find ourselves a regenerated and re-integrated people living not for ourselves but for the honor and glory of God. This is the power of the gospel.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 15:1-16:36, Romans 1:18-32, Psalms 10:1-15, Proverbs 19:6-7

July 13, 2019
WORSHIP

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 15:1-16:36, Romans 1:18-32, Psalms 10:1-15, Proverbs 19:6-7

I love the song David appoints Asaph to sing. It's all about God. All about His majesty and splendor and greatness. All about His mighty deeds. The miracles performed by His mighty hand. It calls us to lay aside our issues. Our struggles. Our trials. Our fears. It calls us to lay aside our distractions. Preoccupations. Those things that draw our attention away from God. It calls us to lay down our personal preferences. Our needs. Our wants. Our desires. It calls us to focus on God and God alone.

“Oh give thanks to the Lord; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the peoples! Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wondrous works! Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice!” (1 Chronicles 16:8-10)

“Sing to the Lord, all the earth! Tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and he is to be feared above all gods.” (1 Chronicles 16:23-25)

How often do we walk into worship with a critical spirit? How often do we walk out of worship and evaluate the experience based on what we did or did not get out of it? How often do we judge our worship based on the emotions we felt? These questions only betray the poverty of our spiritual condition. The sinful, selfish nature of our hearts. Worship is not about us. It's not about getting our needs met. Our desires fulfilled. It cannot be judged on the relevance to our daily lives. Worship is about God. It's about His Presence. His majesty. His glory. Worship requires all our focus. All our attention. All our energy. The greatness of our God should consume us. Overwhelm the senses. Bring us to our knees in awe and wonder at all He has done. In the light of His mighty works of salvation, the petty needs, wants and desires that occupy so much of our attention should fade into the background.

Does that mean our needs will go unmet? Of course not! God is faithful. Look at how Asaph ends his song. “Say also: “Save us, O God of our salvation, and gather and deliver us from among the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise. Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting!” Then all the people said, “Amen!” and praised the Lord.” (1 Chronicles 16:35-36) Yes, God will deliver. Yes, God will save. Yes, God will answer our prayers. Yes, God's love is steadfast, loyal, and true. But our salvation is but a byproduct of His glory. It is intended to serve His purposes more than our own. Yes, we glory in the fact that our names are written in the Book of Life. Yes, we glory in the fact that God has gathered us from among the nations. Yes, we glory in the fact that we have been forgiven and set free by the Cross. But even these things pale in significance to the glory of God! In fact, these gifts are given in order to lift our eyes above our station. Above our circumstances. Above all earthly wants, needs, and desires to the One who gives so generously and so lavishly to His people.

Worship God, dear friends! Enter His Presence with thanksgiving! Enter His courts with praise! Give Him all the honor and glory He demands and deserves! For He is God and we are but the sheep of His pasture! He is God and we are but dust and ashes! He is God and we are but “few in number, of little account, and sojourners” in this world. Wanderers far from our eternal home. Worship God for He has chosen us from before the foundations of the world to bear His image and reflect His glory to the world!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 16:37-18:17, Romans 2:1-24, Psalms 10:16-18, Proverbs 19:8-9

July 14, 2019
READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: 1 Chronicles 16:37-18:17, Romans 2:1-24, Psalms 10:16-18, Proverbs 19:8-9

Readings for TOMORROW: 1 Chronicles 19-21, Romans 2:25-3:8, Psalms 11, Proverbs 19:10-12

July 15, 2019
TRANSFORMATION

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 19-21, Romans 2:25-3:8, Psalms 11, Proverbs 19:10-12

“But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.” (Romans 2:29)

How does transformation happen? From the outside in or from the inside out? Some combination of both? Imagine being the Apostle Paul. You’re a rabbi trained by the great Gamaliel. You are a highly esteemed leader among the Pharisees. You’ve been steeped in the traditions of your forefathers. You know God’s Law by heart. As such, you believe circumcision is at the heart of what it means to be a Jew. It is the defining mark of the covenant people of God. But on your missionary travels, you’ve seen the Holy Spirit come over Gentiles. You’ve seen uncircumcised people respond to the call of the gospel. Not just in isolated cases but in huge numbers. This breaks down all your categories. It disrupts. It unsettles. You feel the theological ground beneath your feet begin to shift.

We are experiencing a similar shift in our world today. Especially in America where Christendom is breaking down all around us. The old world where the church enjoyed “home field advantage” is gone. Gone are the days when businesses were closed on Sundays. Gone are the days when Wednesday night was church night. Gone are the days – in many cases – where the church occupied the center of a community’s life. We are being pushed to the margins. We can feel the ground beneath our feet beginning to shift.

How did Paul respond? He turned back to the Scriptures. The cultural crisis forced him deeper into his faith. Deeper into his understanding of God. Deeper into his understanding of his own traditions. He went back to Abraham. Back to where it all began. He realized circumcision was but an outward expression of an inward faith. Abraham believed God and this is what was counted to him as righteousness. Not circumcision. Not the outward physical sign. And this gave him fresh eyes to see what God was up to in the world. He was able to extend freedom to the Gentiles rather than require them to become Jewish in their faith. He realized God was pushing past all cultural barriers as the gospel began spreading to the ends of the earth.

What about us? How do we handle the cultural crisis of our own day? How do we deal with the tribalism and identity politics of our age? How do engage people who apply a litmus test to relationships that is analogous to circumcision? Do we fight back with our own labels? Do we isolate and retreat from the public sphere? Do we accommodate to much that we lose our Christian identity altogether?

I’ve thought long and hard about these issues. I’ve prayed for God’s wisdom and here is what I’ve learned. It is God’s love that transforms the human heart, not God’s Law. I cannot “require” people to believe like I do. I cannot force them to act “Christianly.” I cannot “police” their language or behavior. All I can do is love them with the unconditional love and grace of Jesus Christ. As they draw near to Him and come to faith, then I can teach them to “obey all Christ’s commands.” Our obedience to God’s Law flows from a heart transformed by God’s love. And transformation comes as the Spirit descends. Transformation comes as the heart is regenerated. Transformation comes as God removes our heart of stone and gives us a heart flesh. Once this miracle of salvation takes place, then we find the strength and desire to faithfully keep God’s Law.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 22-23, Romans 3:9-31, Psalms 12, Proverbs 19:13-14

July 16, 2019
LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 22-23, Romans 3:9-31, Psalms 12, Proverbs 19:13-14

All of us live under the Law of God. All of us are accountable for every thought, word, and deed. All of us will stand before the judgment seat of Christ where every part of our lives will be laid bare. Nothing will be hidden. Nothing held back. Nothing will escape God's notice. For He sees all and knows all and judges all with righteousness.

Reflecting on the Law of God produces humility. It brings us to our knees. It stops every mouth. It ends every rationalizing and self-justifying thought. The purpose of the Law is to show us the depths of our sin. It holds a mirror up to our soul. It reflects back to us the reality that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. None are righteous. None understand. None truly seek God. All turn aside. All go their own way. All do what is right in their own eyes. Our thoughts are prone to deceit. Our lips prone to bitterness and curses. Our feet swift to shed blood, get revenge, take out our anger on those around us. Our paths are lined with the bodies of those we've hurt and wounded along the way. We do not fear God. We do not love God. We have no peace with God. This is the fundamental truth of our existence. We were conceived in sin. Born in iniquity. And there is no escape.

Many years ago, I took some classes on psychology. One of the experiments had to do with learned helplessness. As I remember it, an animal was put in a box with the lid closed and given a shock. Because it could not escape, it eventually stopped trying. It simply endured. Even after the lid was removed, it would not jump out. It "learned helplessness." In many ways, that is the intended purpose of the Law of God. To teach us how utterly helpless and hopeless we are to save ourselves. We live in a closed system. A world corrupted by sin. There is no escape. The lid is too tight. We cannot get out. Our only hope is that the Master will come and save us from our broken condition.

This is what Paul is pointing us to this morning. The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the Law! It is a righteousness available through faith to all who believe in Jesus Christ! This righteousness is a gift. It cannot be earned. It cannot be achieved. It cannot be gained. It can only be received. God knows the broken condition of our world. He sees the helplessness of His creatures. He understands our hopeless condition. So He sends His Son to atone for our sin and to show forth His righteousness that God might both be just and the justifier of the one who believes.

The good news of the gospel is that God has done what we could not! He has achieved what we never could! He has kept the Law! He has fulfilled the Law! He has satisfied the Law with its demands! And now He simply calls us to believe Him. To trust in what He has accomplished on our behalf! Trust Jesus, friends! For your life! For your future! For our nation and for our world!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 24:1-26:11, Romans 4:1-12, Psalms 13, Proverbs 19:15-16

July 17, 2019
TRUE FAITH

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 24:1-26:11, Romans 4:1-12, Psalms 13, Proverbs 19:15-16

“Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

This statement forms the backbone of Paul’s theology. It is how he made sense of what he saw happening among the Gentiles. Remember, Paul was a Jew. And not just any Jew, he was a Pharisee. And not just any Pharisee but a leader among them. Advanced in his knowledge. His zeal for the faith unmatched by his peers. Yes, Paul had met the Risen Christ and it had transformed him. He converted to the Christian faith. He realized all the promises of God had been fulfilled in Jesus. By raising Christ from the dead, Yahweh had ratified Jesus’ life and teachings. But Paul still wasn’t prepared for God’s Spirit to be poured out on the Gentiles. He wasn’t prepared for God to save the unclean. Impure. Uncircumcised heathen. But he could not deny what he saw happening before his eyes. So he dove back into the Scriptures. If God was indeed delivering those who were not circumcised, then what value did circumcision hold? Did this nullify the covenant of God? Was God somehow going back on His promises?

Not at all. “Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.” (Romans 4:11-12) The covenant was established with Abraham by faith not by circumcision. It was Abraham’s belief and trust that God would do what He had promised that made him righteous in God’s sight. The act of circumcision was simply a step of obedience that sealed the righteousness Abraham already had received by faith. The implications of this realization staggered Paul. It meant Abraham was not just the father of the Jewish people but the spiritual father of all who believed. Circumcised and uncircumcised alike! Jew and Gentile alike!

But what is true faith? Paul will define it a little later in chapter four, again using Abraham as his example. “No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” (Romans 4:20-22) True faith is not an intellectual assent to an idea. It is not a belief in an abstraction we call “god.” It is not intelligent design. It is not moral therapeutic deism. It is not sentimentalism. It is not what’s proposed by the “COEXIST” bumper sticker. True faith is trusting in the promise of God. Staking your life, your livelihood, and your future on the fundamental premise that God is able to do what He has promised. And what has God promised? He has promised if you lose your life like Jesus did, you will find it. If you give your life away like Jesus did, you will gain it. If you lay down your life like Jesus did, you will find God raising you back up again.

Following Jesus requires us to die to self. Die to our desires. Die to our wants. Die to our needs. Die to our hopes and dreams. Following Jesus requires us to trust God with our future. Trust God with our lives. Trust God to provide for us. Protect us. Guide us and direct us. Following Jesus requires us to live with eternity in mind. Store up our treasures for heaven. Live as citizens of God’s Kingdom among the kingdoms of this earth. Make no mistake, living for Christ will cost you in a world that is doing all it can to kill Him. Living for Christ will set you apart. It will make you a target for the religious and irreligious alike. You will be hated by both the prodigal and the Pharisee. You will find yourself cutting against the grain over and over again. Just like Abraham. Just like Paul. The key is to keep your eyes on Jesus. His grace is sufficient. His love is enough. He is with you always even to the end of the age.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 26:12-27:34, Romans 4:13-5:5, Psalms 14, Proverbs 19:17

July 18, 2019
NATIONAL SUFFERING

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 26:12-27:34, Romans 4:13-5:5, Psalms 14, Proverbs 19:17

Our nation is suffering. Hatred and anger and rage are on the rise. Forces of racism and bigotry seemingly on the march. Spurred on by political leaders on both the Left and Right who desire nothing more than power. The play to their base rather than appeal to the whole country. Partisan politics devolving into open warfare. The result is division. A chasm that is growing with each passing day. With each passing speech. It is hard to see how this ends well. In the meantime, real people in real communities across our country are suffering. The fruit of our rotten political discourse emboldens the worst among us. Racists march. Anarchists attack. Hate crimes rise. Fear gives way to violence. Casualties mount.

Why is all this happening? Where is God in all this? The words of the Psalmist ring true this morning, "The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one." (Psalms 14:1-3) God is looking down on us right now. But what does the Lord see? A people who have turned away. Foolish people who no longer believe in God. Idolatrous people who have recast God in their own image. We have sown the wind and are reaping the whirlwind. In our pride and arrogance, we believed we didn't need God. Didn't need His guidance. Didn't need to follow His ways. We thought we could relegate Him to the private sphere. We thought we could put Him in a corner while we got on with the rest of our lives. We thought His ways were too naive. Too weak for the harsh realities of this world. We refused to humble ourselves and acknowledge our national sins of slavery, racism, abortion, and genocide. So our foundations began to crumble. The ground beneath us turned to sand. And we are suffering.

So now, in what feels like the 11th hour, where do we find hope? Only in the Lord. Friends, we have peace with God only through the Lord Jesus Christ. Because of what He accomplished for us on the Cross, we have been reconciled to God. And God entrusts us with the message of reconciliation for the world. God is even now sending us out as reconcilers into a world that is full of brokenness, hatred, violence and evil. He is sending us out as sheep among wolves. He is sending us out to be wise as serpents but harmless as doves. As such, we will suffer for our faith. This is to be expected. The world will not receive the message of love we have to offer. They will reject it as naive and foolish. Weak and helpless. Because their minds have grown dark and their hearts hard, they will turn on us. They will find us to be the easiest targets for their rage. Such has always been the lot of the people of God. But we, like Jesus, "rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." (Romans 5:3-5)

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ then God's love has been poured into your heart through the Holy Spirit. God has literally filled you up with His love so that you can go out into the world and give it away. It is a fresh spring in your heart that never stops flowing. It is a deep well that never runs dry. You don't have to manufacture it. You are not in charge of creating it. You don't have to muster it each day by your own strength. It is there by virtue of your faith in Christ. My challenge to you is to give this love away. Give it away to your family and friends. Give it away to your neighbors and co-workers. Give it away on social media and in your conversations with those you meet. Give it away even to your enemies and those who hate you. The only hope our communities, our nation, and our world have are the people of God living as the light of God by sharing the love of God. Go and share God's love today!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 28-29, Romans 5:6-21, Psalms 15, Proverbs 19:18-19

July 19, 2019
TRUE FINANCIAL PEACE

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 28-29, Romans 5:6-21, Psalms 15, Proverbs 19:18-19

Someone once famously remarked that the last thing to be converted in a person's life is their checkbook. It brings a humorous image to my mind of a person being baptized while holding their wallet in the air. Money is a tough subject for many. It's deeply personal. There never feels like there's enough to go around. Many believers around the world live in life-threatening poverty. The Church has often manipulated and scammed the faithful. We have sold indulgences. We have accumulated great wealth and possessions. We aren't always faithful to take the resources entrusted to us and use them for God's glory in the world. I am sure this is why the Bible says the love of money is the root of all evil. It's why Jesus spent so much time on the subject. He knows what wealth does to our corrupt hearts. He knows greed is an insatiable desire. He knows how easy it is for us to fall into the trap of always wanting more.

That's why I love David's prayer so much. It beautifully frames how we are to think about money and wealth and possessions. Listen to his words again, "Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all." David understands God owns it all. Everything he has is a gift from God. Everything he's achieved is because God stood at his side. God is the only one who has the right to claim ownership over this world. He alone is worthy. He alone deserves all the praise and glory for what He has done. He reigns over the universe and, as king, it is up to Him to bestow riches and honor on those who serve Him.

Imagine how your perspective would change if you truly believed everything you owned was a gift from God? Imagine if you truly believed God reigned and ruled over your life? Not as an abstract thought but as an actual, concrete, daily experience? Would you handle your money differently? Would you cling to your possessions less tightly? Would your anxiety and fear over the future diminish as you found yourself trusting more fully in God to provide?

David clearly understood his position before the Lord. Throughout the course of his life and despite his many, many mistakes, David never seemed to lose sight of how far he'd come and who had raised him up. David was humble before the Lord. He held onto position and power and his possessions lightly. "But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding. O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own." David understood his life was but a shadow. So fleeting. So frail. He was here today and gone tomorrow. He came from the dust and to dust he will return. His short lifespan was minuscule in comparison to God's eternity and all that he had accomplished and accumulated in his life was just as temporal.

How does godly humility change your perspective on your life? Do you understand and reflect on how far you have come and the grace of God in bringing you there? Do you grasp how truly insignificant you are in the grand sweep of God's eternal history? Do you hold onto your achievements and wealth and influence lightly or do you find yourself grasping them ever more tightly as the years pass?

David knows wealth is a major temptation. If we are not careful, love of money can supplant the love of God in our hearts. So he prays to the Lord, "I know, my God, that you test the heart and have pleasure in uprightness. In the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you. O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you." (1 Chronicles 29:10-18)

Keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people and direct their hearts toward you. What a great prayer! What a godly desire! David, at the end of his reign and the end of his life, does not ask for more power. More wealth. More success. Longer life. Greater glory for his kingdom and his people. He simply asks God to keep their hearts true towards Him. To keep them generous and joyful in their giving. To be godly stewards of all they have been given. To grasp how richly blessed they have been so they can continue to be a blessing in this world. May this be our prayer today as well!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 1-3, Romans 6, Psalms 16, Proverbs 19:20-21

July 20, 2019
TRUE FREEDOM

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 1-3, Romans 6, Psalms 16, Proverbs 19:20-21

We are a haunted race. Haunted by Eden. Haunted by what we've lost. Haunted by the poverty of our spiritual condition. Stalked by death. Enslaved by sin. Our minds and hearts darkened and warped and twisted. We like to think we are more than this but we are not. And every day provides fresh evidence of the total depravity of the human condition. Scroll through Twitter. Turn on cable news. Listen to the hatred and bitterness and animosity. Slowly. Inexorably. Inevitably. Our baser, more primal selves are taking control. The further we run from God, the deeper we plunge into depression and despair. The more we resist accountability to our Creator, the faster our descent into hell and ruin.

"Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions." (Romans 6:12) We are in the midst of an age-old conflict. Who will reign? Will it be God? Will it be us? There is an attempt being made – and I have to admit it seems closer than ever – to throw off any vestiges of restraint. We want unfettered freedom. Complete autonomy. We want to be like God. We keep falling for the serpent's lie and we keep dying as a result. We become enslaved to our passions. We find ourselves at the mercy of our worst instincts. We keep making the same mistakes over and over again. We are so confused. So hurt. So wounded. We are suffering and in pain. For those who doubt, simply consider the rapid increase in rates of depression, self-harm, addiction, and suicide. The wages of sin is indeed death...but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord!

"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin...So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 6:1-7, 11)

Friends, Christ has set us free. Christ has broken the power of sin. Christ has defeated the power of death. Christ has delivered us from the power of the devil. No longer do we need be haunted by the memory of a better world. No longer do we need worry about the future. No longer do we need to live in shame and regret over what we have lost or what we have done. In Christ, we have communion with God. In Christ, we have all the riches of heaven. In Christ, our future hope is secure. In Christ, we become citizens of an eternal kingdom. In Christ, we have access to the Father. In Christ, we have all the power and authority we need to walk in newness of life.

Trust Him with your life. Submit to His will. Surrender to His love. Give Him all the control. As you do this, you will find sin no longer reigning over you. No longer exercising dominion over your life. It is for freedom that Christ has set you free so do not go back to a life of slavery!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 4:1-6:11, Romans 7:1-13, Psalms 17, Proverbs 19:22-23

July 21, 2019
GOD IS GOOD

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 4:1-6:11, Romans 7:1-13, Psalms 17, Proverbs 19:22-23

I love the passage from today. The Temple is finished. The furnishings are in place. Everything has been prepared to God's exact specifications. Solomon assembles the leaders of the nation. They fill the streets of Jerusalem. He brings out the ark. All the vessels from the tent of meeting. Everything sacred from the Tabernacle where Israel has met with God for generations. The procession heads down Main Street. Countless sacrifices are made along the way. The noise is deafening. There is singing. There is dancing. There is praising. There is worshiping. There is prayer. All the pomp and pageantry Solomon could muster is on display. Eventually they reach the courts of the Temple. The ark is installed in its place in the Holy of Holies. And in that moment the people cry out with one voice,

"For he is good, and his steadfast love endures forever..." (2 Chronicles 5:13)

If you had to boil your faith down to a single statement. If you thought long and hard about how to summarize what you believe about God, you would be hard-pressed to beat this simple yet profound statement of faith.

God is good. This must be true. Life is too hard. The universe seemingly too random and capricious. The suffering of our world too great. If God is not good, He cannot be trusted. If God is not good, then we are left to the mercy of our circumstances. If God is not good then there is no redemption in tragedy. No purpose for our pain. If God is not good then life has not ultimate end. If God is not good then there is no basis for human morality. No objective standard to guide us into what is true and noble and pure and holy.

God is love. This must be true. We are all broken creatures. We all fall short. We all struggle for significance and dignity and worth. We look to pleasure. We look to success. We look to money. We look to influence and power. But all of these fail to satisfy. All of these fade to ashes and dust. And yet our hearts still yearn for something more. We yearn to be loved for who we are. Not as we should be. Not as we ought to be. But as we are...warts and all.

God's love endures forever. Here's the good news about God. He is steadfast. Loyal. Faithful. True. He never leaves us or forsakes us no matter how hard or dark the road may get. God is always at our side. From His goodness flows our goodness. From His love flows our self-worth. And because He is always there, we never walk alone.

Friends, these are the fundamental truths we declare about God. He is good. He is love. He is steadfast. He endures forever. This is the only sure foundation on which we can build a life. This is the bedrock on which we stand. No matter how fierce the storms or how raging the seas, we will never be shaken for God is with us. He is our fortress. He is our refuge. He is our strength and help in time of trouble. Do not be afraid. Do not tremble. Do not let your insecurities get the best of you. You are loved by a good, good Father.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 6:12-8:10, Romans 7:14-8:8, Psalms 18:1-15, Proverbs 19:24-25

July 22, 2019
PRAYING FOR REVIVAL

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 6:12-8:10, Romans 7:14-8:8, Psalms 18:1-15, Proverbs 19:24-25

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 8:11-10:19, Romans 8:9-25, Psalms 18:16-36, Proverbs 19:26

July 23, 2019
SUFFERING

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 8:11-10:19, Romans 8:9-25, Psalms 18:16-36, Proverbs 19:26

“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”
(Romans 8:16-17)

What if I told you suffering was an essential part of the Christian life? Would it make you think twice about following Jesus? Would it cause you to re-evaluate what you believe? One of the great heresies of our time is prosperity preaching. It's the idea that if you are faithful enough. If you are obedient enough. You will be blessed. God will grant you your heart's desire. You will be wealthy. You will be healthy and strong. You will be successful. The television airways are filled with these messages. Prosperity preachers putting on a show and making bargains on your behalf with God. Implicitly or explicitly, they tie suffering to sin. They believe pain is a result of disobedience. They argue poverty and sickness is a result of a lack of faith. Such nonsense!

Paul makes it clear that those who follow Christ will share in His sufferings. Not because we seek suffering out. Not because Jesus demands His followers live in constant pain or poverty. But simply because the lives we lead put us at odds with the world around us. Our faith makes us aliens and strangers in our culture. It sets us apart. Makes us a target. Why? Because we serve a heavenly King. Our primary allegiance is not to king and country. Not to flag or nation. Not to tribe or family. But to God Himself. By faith, we are adopted as His sons and daughters. By faith, we become part of His family. By faith, our citizenship is transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.

Jesus suffered. Jesus endured incredible pain. Jesus was tortured, falsely accused, and executed by the State because he posed a threat. His message subverted the kingdoms of this world. His preaching confronted the religious leaders of His day. He called them to repent. He called them to confess. He called them to lay down their wealth and power and position and authority for the sake of others. He called them to give their very lives away for the sake of the impure, unholly, rejected, and outcast. He upended social conventions. He tore down cultural taboos. Even the laws of nature obeyed Him! Disease disappeared. Demons were cast out. Death itself defeated. Watching Jesus work must have been awesome and frightening all at the same time.

Jesus followers – the people known as Christians – are called to the same way of life. Paul reminds us the suffering we endure for our faith is actually what makes us co-heirs with Christ! And we are not alone. All of creation suffers along with us under the curse of sin. Every single human being struggles under the weight of sin. The difference is that those who follow Christ have hope. We have hope of an eternal life waiting for us when Christ returns to claim His own. On that great day, our adoption will be complete. Our sufferings will come to an end. Every tear will be wiped away. Every hurt healed. Every pain redressed. Every injustice set right. This is why our present sufferings aren't worth comparing to the glory that will one day be revealed in us!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 11-13, Romans 8:26-39, Psalms 18:37-50, Proverbs 19:27-29

July 24, 2019
WHAT'S THE POINT OF CHURCH?

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 11-13, Romans 8:26-39, Psalms 18:37-50, Proverbs 19:27-29

I can't tell you how many times I have heard this question. Usually from people who've been burned or frustrated or wounded by an experience. Sometimes from others who find church boring or old-fashioned or useless. And the answers I hear so many give are unsatisfying. Church is for inspiration. Church teaches you how to be a good person. Church is where I get my needs met. Notice the common theme? Church is about me? Sometimes I hear better answers. Church is where I find my community. Church is where I worship God. Church is where I am challenged to grow in my faith. Yes, those are deeper realities but still too self-centered for my taste.

Listen to the words of Jesus. "You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth." He is speaking to His disciples. The nascent group that will become the beating heart of the church after His death, resurrection, and ascension. Notice the church is not designed to meet their needs. Not designed to fulfill their longings. It's not about them at all. It's about the world. It's about bringing light to world darkened by sin and despair. It's about preserving (the role of salt in the ancient world) a world from complete and total corruption.

Jesus' words came to mind as we read through 2 Chronicles this morning. "And those who had set their hearts to seek the Lord God of Israel came after them from all the tribes of Israel to Jerusalem to sacrifice to the Lord, the God of their fathers. They strengthened the kingdom of Judah, and for three years they made Rehoboam the son of Solomon secure, for they walked for three years in the way of David and Solomon." (2 Chronicles 11:16-17) You may remember from our readings in 1 and 2 Kings the decisions of the kings of Israel to depart from the true worship of God. They set up their own temples. They established their own priesthood. They developed their own rituals. In short, they disobeyed the Lord and refused to worship Him in the way He deserves and demands. As a result, the priests and Levites left the nation of Israel and came to Judah. They sacrificed homes and lands and community in order to stay true to God. The impact they made on the southern Kingdom was enormous as was the void they left in the northern Kingdom. Their departure hastened the northern kingdom's plunge into ruin while their arrival in the southern kingdom strengthened it significantly. Such is the nature of salt and light.

Now consider our own situation. Consider what is taking place in our own country. Consider the anger and hate and bitterness and rage of our cultural moment. Sin and corruption are on the rise. More and more people seeking to throw off any biblical restraint as they pursue their own desires. Each person doing what is right in their own eyes. The gospel is now considered a threat. The church is being accused of fostering hatred and intolerance. Christians are beginning to be marginalized. They are losing jobs. Businesses are being discriminated against. Suggestions are being made that holding to a biblical faith disqualifies one for public service. And too many churches are confirming the worst fears of the world by sacrificing deeply held convictions for political power

So what's the Biblical response? How should the Church respond? She must recover her God-given vocation. Listen to how Lesslie Newbigin describes it, "In the Old Testament story, God chooses Abraham and a nation that will come from him to bear the blessing for all nations. Israel is called to be a sign and instrument of God's redemptive purpose for all humanity, but they fail in their calling. And so God judges Israel, and "from the beginning there is a process of elimination. . . . There is a covenant between God and Israel, and those who flout the terms of the covenant are no part of the chosen people." There is a narrowing until, at the cross, "He alone on that day is Israel." Jesus fulfills the purpose of election, faithfully doing what Israel did not do—disclosing and effecting God's renewal for the whole world. "But this is not the end of the story of Israel. It is the beginning of the story of the true Israel." For Newbigin, "Jesus does not found a new people of God, a new society," but restores Israel to their calling. His mission is to Israel, and he appoints twelve as a representative number to make known the beginnings of the true Israel. Following the cross and resurrection and the mighty event of Pentecost, the way is clear for all nations: "Now at last the ancient promise that Israel shall be a light to the

Gentiles and salvation to the ends of the earth is to be fulfilled.” The “Church is the Israel of God, not a newly founded society.” Gentiles are incorporated into the true Israel that is gathered, renewed, and sent by Christ. They are like branches engrafted into an olive tree. “There is only one Israel of God, one olive tree of God’s planting.” What our world needs now more than ever is a restored and renewed Church. A Church with a deep sense of calling and a fundamental conviction to be who God has declared her to be. Salt and Light. Will we do this perfectly? Of course not. Can we do this faithfully? Absolutely. What will it require? A radical re-orientation away from Self and towards God and the world He loves so much.

Consider your relationship to the Church. To the Body and Bride of Christ. What role are you playing in building up the Body? In presenting the Bride spotless and blameless before her Lord? How are you sacrificially giving of your time, talent, and treasure to help the Church fulfill her high calling?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 14-16, Romans 9, Psalms 19, Proverbs 20:1

July 25, 2019
ELECTION

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 14-16, Romans 9:1-24, Psalms 19, Proverbs 20:1

Today's reading begins a challenging section. Paul is asking deep questions about the promises and purposes of God. So much of which is shrouded in mystery. So much of which we will never know this side of heaven. Has the Word of God failed? Is God unjust? How can God fault those whom He has not chosen? These questions are important. It is vital to wrestle with them honestly and vulnerably. True faith welcomes such challenges and doesn't settle for easy answers.

To begin, we must check our assumptions at the door. There are no standards of justice outside of God. God is not answerable to any human legal code nor does He subject Himself to human notions of universal fairness. God is the Potter. We are the clay. This fundamental principle undergirds everything Paul will say in these few chapters. The baseline for this discussion begins with God being God and human beings being human beings. The Creator is not the same as His creation. The creation is not the same as its Creator. There is a massive, ontological distinction between the two that must be maintained if we are to find our way through this quandary.

Secondly, because God is God, He has every right to exercise His sovereign choice over all He has made. He chose Abraham and Sarah out of all the families on the face of the earth. He chose Jacob over Esau before they were born. He chose Israel over Egypt. Moses over Pharaoh. The full witness of Scripture makes it clear that God freely chooses some vessels for honor and some for dishonor. Scripture makes clear that God endures with patience the "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" so that He might "make known the riches of glory for His vessels of mercy." Over and over again, we see this played out in the Old Testament. There is simply no other way to honestly interpret it.

Thirdly, what are we then to make of what's happening with Israel? God's elect? God's chosen? "To them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all..." (Romans 9:4-5) Furthermore, what are we to make of the Gentiles? God's non-elect? The pagans who've rejected God all their lives? Though they have not pursued righteousness somehow they attained it by faith! Does this mean God's elect have been rejected? By no means! "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring..." (Romans 9:6-7) Ethnicity no longer matters! What matters is faith and God has maintained a remnant – of which the Apostle Paul is one - who have been saved by grace.

Fourthly, God isn't done! God's plan for Israel is not yet complete! So the Gentiles who have been grafted into God's family should not become prideful or take God's grace for granted. "Remember it is not you who supports the root but the root that supports you." (Romans 11:18) Instead, they should wait and pray for the day when the partial hardening on Israel is softened because the full number of Gentiles have finally come in and God saves all of Israel.

How will that happen? Paul has no idea. He simply knows God is faithful. He will never abandon His people. His love is steadfast, loyal, and true. So at the end of all this deep wrestling there can only be an exclamation of praise. God is God. We are not. Thanks be to God! Or as Paul puts it, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Romans 11:33)

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 17-18, Romans 9:25-10:13, Psalms 20, Proverbs 20:2-3

July 26, 2019
READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: 2 Chronicles 17-18, Romans 9:25-10:13, Psalms 20, Proverbs 20:2-3

Readings for TOMORROW: 2 Chronicles 19-20, Romans 10:14-11:12, Psalms 21, Proverbs 20:4-6

July 27, 2019
SINGING OUR FAITH

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 19-20, Romans 10:14-11:12, Psalms 21, Proverbs 20:4-6

One of my favorite professors in seminary was an African-American man by the name of Cleophus LaRue. He was beloved by many and well-known for launching into sermons in the middle of class. There's nothing quite like listening to great African-American preaching. There is a timbre and cadence that inspires and lifts the soul. Such was my experience in this man's class. I remember one day a fellow student asking Dr. LaRue if there was anything worth preaching in the Old Testament. "It's full of all kinds of archaic rules and laws and histories that have no relevance to today's world." Dr. LaRue looked at him in shock. "Nothing worth preaching? Do you not know? Have you not heard of the time Jehoshaphat sent his army into battle led by the choir?" And off he went! It was awe-inspiring and I've never forgotten it.

Jehoshaphat is one of my favorite kings. He's not perfect. He makes mistakes along the way. He makes alliances with the wrong kind of people. And yet, his heart is for the Lord. "Jehoshaphat lived at Jerusalem. And he went out again among the people, from Beersheba to the hill country of Ephraim, and brought them back to the Lord, the God of their fathers." (2 Chronicles 19:4) I cannot imagine the daily pressures a king faces. Pressures to make decisions. Pressures to provide for his people. Pressures to defend against his enemies. Pressures all around and yet Jehoshaphat made it a priority to go out among his people and bring them back to the Lord. He obeyed the Great Commission long before Jesus spoke those words. He taught his people to obey all the Lord had commanded. He believed one of the defining priorities of his kingship was the ability to make disciples. To foster an environment in his nation where his people would grow spiritually. It's truly stunning when you take a step back to think about it.

Now some might ask what purpose did it serve? Some might question if this is really the king's job? Shouldn't he be attending to affairs of state? But then we run across the story my professor preached on that day in class. The story of Jehoshaphat sending his army out in battle led by the choir. They are outnumbered. They are outmatched. They are outgunned. But rather than despair, Jehoshaphat turns his heart to the Lord. He calls on the Lord to be faithful to His promises. He walks by faith, trusting God to deliver him from all his enemies. And his people - having been taught the faith by Jehoshaphat himself and seen his example firsthand - follow him. Listen to what Jehoshaphat says and does, "Hear me, Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the Lord your God, and you will be established; believe his prophets, and you will succeed." And when he had taken counsel with the people, he appointed those who were to sing to the Lord and praise him in holy attire, as they went before the army, and say, "Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever." And when they began to sing and praise, the Lord set an ambush against the men of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah, so that they were routed." (2 Chronicles 20:20-22)

Imagine trusting God so much that you can literally face death with a tune on your lips! Imagine believing God so much that you can walk into battle with a song in your heart! Imagine facing whatever overwhelming odds you may face in your life with joy because you know...YOU KNOW...the Lord is good and His steadfast love endures forever! How does one get to such a place in their faith? By worshiping God. Spending time with Him regularly and frequently. Never neglecting the gathering of God's people. Seeking to serve God in all you say and do throughout the week. Keeping God's will and God's glory as the overarching priority of your life not because you are trying to earn anything or have something to prove but simply because you love God and you want to live for Him. Will you do this perfectly? No. Neither did Jehoshaphat. But God's not asking for perfection. He's asking for your heart. Give Him your heart today.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 21-23, Romans 11:13-36, Psalms 22:1-18, Proverbs 20:7

July 28, 2019
ECHOES IN ETERNITY

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 21-23, Romans 11:13-36, Psalms 22:1-18, Proverbs 20:7

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 24-25, Romans 12, Psalms 22:19-31, Proverbs 20:8-10

July 29, 2019
CONFORM VS. TRANSFORM

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 24-25, Romans 12, Psalms 22:19-31, Proverbs 20:8-10

I recently came across this quote from one of my favorite pastors, "I more and more find the precious part of each day to be the thirty or forty minutes I spend each morning before breakfast with the Bible. All the rest of the day I am bombarded with the stories that the world is telling about itself. I am more and more skeptical about these stories. As I take time to immerse myself in the story that the Bible tells, my vision is cleared and I see things in another way. I see the day that lies ahead in its place in God's story." (Lesslie Newbigin) It reminded me of what Paul says in Romans 12 about not being conformed to the patterns of this world but instead be transformed by the renewal of the mind through Spirit.

What does such transformation look like? It looks like the life Paul describes at the end of chapter 12. "Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:9-21)

This is the difference Christ makes in a person's life. He changes us from the inside out. He shifts our outlook and understanding of the world. He transforms our thoughts and our attitudes as we surrender more and more of our hearts to Him. Because we are so deeply satisfied in Christ. Because Christ meets our every need. Because Christ is the object of all our devotion and affection, we are set free. Set free to love. Set free to do good. Set free to honor one another. To put one another's needs above our own. We are patient in affliction knowing it is but a season. We are constant in prayer because we know our Father hears our every word. We are set free to be generous because money has no hold on us. We can bless those who attack us or seek to do us harm because Christ Himself is our defense and our reputation is secure in heaven. Christ gives us the confidence to grieve with those who grieve and celebrate the success of others. Because we rest in the forgiveness and grace of Christ, we can extend it out to others which leads to unity and harmony. Humility rather than pride is our constant companion. And we can release the need to get even or get back because we trust in the justice of God.

I get asked all the time, "What makes a Christian different?" Friends, this is it! When Paul talks about not being conformed to the patterns of this world, he means rejecting the way of hate. The way of outrage. The way of selfishness and pride. He means rejecting the ways of sin and evil for the ends never justify the means. He means rejecting any compromise with godlessness and instead living a life of unconditional love and grace. He means laying aside our desire for control. Our desire for power. Our desire for wealth and privilege and position and instead humbling ourselves before God. Christians understand our lives are not our own. We have been bought with a price. We have been purchased by God. We are slaves to Christ. We have no will of our own. No desires of our own. We exist to serve Christ and to bring Him glory. This is our highest calling. Our life's passion. Our greatest priority. And it is the world's most desperate need. Salt and light, friends. This is what you are in Christ. Believe this! And live your life for Him!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 26-28, Romans 13, Psalms 23, Proverbs 20:11

July 30, 2019
FAITH AND POLITICS

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 26-28, Romans 13, Psalms 23, Proverbs 20:11

Imagine you are the Apostle Paul. Writing to a group of Christians living in Rome in the late 50's AD. The Roman Empire has suffered tremendously since the reign of Augustus Caesar. Successor after successor has tried and failed to live up to his legacy. Political opposition is met with violence. The Praetorian Guard (think Secret Service of the first century) assassinates the very emperors they swear to protect. Tax rates rise and fall depending on public opinion polls. The borders of the empire are starting to crumble. The government is unstable and rulers are often certifiably insane. Nero rises to power. The initial signs are good. He seems to care about the poor. He often takes the side of the little guy. It looks like he's being advised well by Seneca. By all accounts, things are looking up. Then he murders his stepbrother. Murders his mother. Murders rival senators who oppose him. He initiates building projects that exhaust the treasury and overtax the populace. Rumors spread about the Great Fire that burned Rome for a week in July of 64 AD. Nero blames the Christians. He starts systematically persecuting them. He imprisons them. He throws them to the lions. He burns them alive in his gardens. It's a rough time.

Now imagine receiving this letter from Paul and reading these words, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed." (Romans 13:1-7) How would you respond? What thoughts would go through your mind if you were living in Rome under Nero watching the country descend into chaos? How would you feel about the "governing authorities" when you see them carrying your friends off to be tortured and executed for their faith? How likely would you be to submit to them? Continue to be a model citizen? Pay your taxes? Honor the emperor? Is Paul serious? Does he not understand who's in power here? Is he ignorant of what's actually happening on the streets of Rome?

Clearly, Paul understands. He will be imprisoned in Rome by 60AD himself, awaiting his eventual torture and execution. He has been flogged. Stoned. Beaten. Left for dead. He has been falsely accused. Falsely imprisoned. He knows what it's like to suffer and yet, throughout his own life, he seemed to model the very words he just wrote to his Roman friends. Jesus did as well. Jesus submitted himself to the governing authorities of this world. Herod. Pilate. The Sanhedrin. All driven by a lust for power. All corrupt to the core. And yet Jesus refused to call down legions of angels to fight at his side. He allowed his farce of a trial to stand. He refused to advocate for Himself before Pilate. He ignored Herod when he asked for a sign. Why? Jesus and Paul both understood they belonged to a Kingdom not of this world. They were citizens of a heavenly empire that transcended any earthly one. Their sole allegiance was to the God of the universe who had given all authority in heaven and earth to Jesus so there was no need to fight the power. No need to lead a rebellion. Because at best you would be replacing one sinful system with another.

At the same time, Paul is not advocating apathy. He is not calling for Christians to become doormats for the empire. What he calls for is a very proactive way of living that sets an example before culture and society of humble godliness even in the face of persecution. We are never to surrender the moral high ground! Never to surrender our deeply held Kingdom values! Never to give up Jesus for the sake of political expediency and gain! Why? First and foremost, we recognize all authority comes from God. It serves His purposes. God is able to bend both good and evil intentions to His will. God is able to use even the most corrupt to accomplish His plan. No matter what happens. No matter who gets elected President. No matter who serves in Congress. No matter

who gets confirmed to the Supreme Court. ALL of them serve at God's pleasure. He takes them down just as easily as He raises them up. All of them rule under His sovereign authority and command.

Second, Paul understands the power of a godly witness. Even corrupt rulers cannot deny the power of the gospel. This was the genius behind the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights struggle. He believed by engaging in peaceful, non-violent protest of unjust laws that African-Americans and their allies would hold a mirror up to the corrupt soul of segregation. They believed their godly example would expose the evil legacy of slavery. They believed their political "enemies" needed salvation not destruction and this set them apart. The same was true for Nelson Mandela in South Africa. The same was true for Pope John Paul II when he led the Solidarity movement against communism in Poland. The same was true for Ghandi - though not a Christian, he based his resistance on the example of Christ - in India. In each and every case, these leaders led movements that transformed the course of nations and they were almost entirely based on the "good conduct" of their followers. "Do what is good and you will receive (the ruler's) approval, for he is God's servant for your good." (Romans 13:3) This is the power of a godly witness.

Finally, Paul elevates the cardinal virtue of humility. Submission. Subjection. Offering respect and honor to the office even if the person in the office is corrupt. Paul believes we should model our lives after Jesus. As he will write to his Philippians friends, Jesus is by nature God. But Jesus did not hold onto His equality with God. He relinquished it. He gave it up. He emptied Himself of all His divine rights and riches in order to become a human being. And not just any human being but a servant. A slave. But even then Jesus wasn't content. He took it one step further. Humbling Himself to death. The most humiliating death possible. Death on a cross. Paul sought to pattern his own life after Jesus and he calls all Christians to do the same. "Follow me as I seek to follow Christ." (1 Corinthians 11:1) Just as Christ rendered to Caesar what was Caesar's, Paul now calls on Christians in Rome to pay their taxes. Keep honest financial records. Respect the authorities. Honor the emperor. For in so doing, we honor Christ.

Of all the things we've read this year, this may be the most difficult passage for us to accept. Hate is the political currency of our day. Rage. Anger. Condemnation. Character assassination is our national pastime. We rejoice when our enemies fall. We defend our allies at all costs. We will sacrifice everything – including our Kingdom values - on the altar of political power and gain. Scorched-earth resistance is now the norm when the opposing party is in power and it is crippling our nation. And this is true for both Republicans and Democrats. Sadly, Christians seem no different than their non-Christian neighbors in this respect. In fact, we often seem to be out front leading the way and our blatant hypocrisy is on public display. Jesus weeps, friends. He weeps to see us so easily fall prey to the lust for power, influence, and control. He weeps to see us so easily sacrifice our witness and for so little. He weeps as He watches His people - citizens of the Kingdom of God - so easily and readily give up the moral high ground.

Thankfully, the truth of God remains. Though the grass withers and the flower fades, the Word of God is eternal. He is still on His throne. He still reigns from on high. He still sits at the right hand of the Father. He will bend even this time to His will. He will use even the corrupt politics of our day and age to accomplish His plan. There is nothing any human being can do that will thwart His purposes. So submit to the governing authorities, friends. Live godly lives before them. Witness to them by working for justice and righteousness. Pray without ceasing for the Spirit's work in their hearts. Give them the respect and honor due them by virtue of the office they hold.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 29, Romans 14, Psalms 24, Proverbs 20:12

July 31, 2019
SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 29, Romans 14, Psalms 24, Proverbs 20:12

I recently hiked a 14er with my family. It can be a grueling exercise mentally and emotionally and physically. You find yourself often wishing you were further along than you actually are. In fact, I encourage my children not to look ahead lest they get frustrated. Just focus on your feet and take each step. Once you reach the top, it is a surreal experience. There is nothing quite like feeling like you are on top of the world. As you head back down the trail, you meet others who are on their way up and you try to encourage them. You know how they feel.

I think our spiritual life is similar to hiking a 14er. You have people strung out along the trail. Some are at or near the top. Others are just getting started. Some have reached plateaus where they rest. Others are toiling away. Some are battling exhaustion with every step. Still others are making their way back down having experienced the exhilaration of the summit. The key is not to judge a person for where they are but to encourage, challenge, and exhort them along the way.

I love how the Apostle Paul describes it in Romans 14. He's speaking to a community of Jews and Gentiles who are struggling to get along. Struggling to honor one another. Struggling to recognize and encourage each other on their journey towards God. Some are stronger in their faith. Some are weak. Some are knowledgeable in their faith. Others are not. Some cling to certain laws pertaining to food and drink and days and seasons for comfort. Others do not find comfort in these things. In fact, they often feel restrictive. The point Paul makes to everyone is not to judge. To not use your "rights" to put a stumbling block in front of a brother or sister. To instead seek to serve them in love. To put aside anything that might get in the way of true and authentic fellowship.

"Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand...For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us will give an account of himself to God... Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up-building." (Romans 14:4, 7-12, 18-19)

Ultimately living together in Christian community puts our faith to the test. Do we truly believe only God can judge the human heart? Do we truly believe our unity rests on Christ alone? Do we truly believe all of us are required to die to self? Do we truly believe no matter what happens, we are the Lord's?

I have traveled the world. Met Christians in many different cultures and countries. I have worshiped in many different languages. I have fellowshipped with new believers and old believers. Christians who've been walking with Christ for a few days and Christians who've been walking with Christ for decades. My life has been enriched by these experiences. Do I have my own opinions? My own preferences? My own ideas and way of doing things? Of course. But I surrender all that to Christ. I recognize so much of what I take for granted is culturally conditioned by the world I grew up in. So I surrender it to Christ. And I seek to the paths that make for peace and mutual encouragement. How can you do this for your church family today?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 30-31, Romans 15:1-22, Psalms 25:1-15, Proverbs 20:13-15