

BIBLE IN A YEAR

BIBLE, FOLLOWING JESUS, DISCIPLESHIP

2019

STUDY AND COMMENTARY

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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August 1, 2019
THE DANGER OF EXPEDIENCY

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

I don't know about you but I find it far too easy to take short cuts. Life is too busy. The world is too crazy. The pressures and demands I face on a daily basis too much. I am often anxious and afraid for our future. So I look for life hacks. I look for ways to save time and money and energy. In such moments, I am tempted to compromise. Compromise my convictions. Compromise my values. Compromise my faith simply for the sake of getting things done. The late, great Roman Catholic monk, Thomas Merton, was once asked what he thought posed the greatest danger to the church. "Efficiency" was his answer. Mine would be similar. Expediency. Expediency is the process of getting things done quickly and efficiently but often at the expense of our moral values. We sacrifice for the sake of moving on. We crater for the sake of convenience. Sure, we tell ourselves the "ends justify the means" but that answer never quite satisfies. We know when we've taken the low road. We know when we've given in to our baser instincts. And even though things may have gotten done or decisions made that we support, it never feels good.

"All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies." (Psalms 25:10) How I wish we believed this truth! How I wish we held fast to righteousness! How I wish we refused to take the paths of this world and instead clung to God no matter the cost! Reading through the Kings and Chronicles of the Old Testament feels so familiar these days. We too have compromised with the Baals and false gods of our age. We too have turned aside from seeking God with a pure heart. We too are trying to have it both ways. The kings of Israel and Judah were not necessarily bad people. Yes, the Bible often calls them evil but that is because they fail in their one true duty and that is to seek the Lord with a whole heart. A single-minded devotion. Judged by this standard, all of us are guilty. All of us are evil. No, these kings we read about were real people just like you. Just like me. They were given great responsibility. Just like you. Just like me. They had access to great wealth and influence and power. Just like you. Just like me. But they too often privileged expediency over faithfulness.

I think that's why it's so refreshing to read about Hezekiah. Here's a king who chose the paths of righteousness. He chose the paths of the Lord despite the cost. He called Israel back to true worship and obedience despite being mocked and ridiculed. He re-instituted pure worship and even led the way by giving generously so the people could make the right sacrifices. I love how the author of the Chronicles describes him, "Thus Hezekiah did throughout all Judah, and he did what was good and right and faithful before the Lord his God. And every work that he undertook in the service of the house of God and in accordance with the law and the commandments, seeking his God, he did with all his heart, and prospered." (2 Chronicles 31:20-21) Hezekiah prospered because he sought the Lord with a whole heart. He wasn't perfect. In fact, when the people of God failed to purify themselves prior to celebrating the Passover, Hezekiah was quick to acknowledge his mistake. As king, he was responsible. As the one with authority, he was culpable for their failures. So what did Hezekiah do? Did he make excuses? Play the victim? Claim ignorance? Justify himself? No. He prayed for forgiveness. "May the good Lord pardon everyone who sets his heart to seek God, the Lord, the God of his fathers, even though not according to the sanctuary's rules of cleanness." And the Lord heard Hezekiah and healed the people." (2 Chronicles 30:19-20)

One of the main reasons we fall for the temptation of expediency is because we confuse holiness with perfection. We confuse righteousness with always getting it right. We live in fear of making a mistake. And because we know deep down we cannot live up to this impossible standard, we settle for less. We give up. We lose hope. But the Bible clearly teaches us through Hezekiah's example that the sacrifices God desires are broken spirits and contrite hearts. God wants our devotion. God wants our full attention. God wants us to seek Him with our whole hearts. God wants our worship to be authentic and real. He has no interest in us going through the motions. He wants us to serve Him not from a sense of duty but from a deep desire to love and please our Savior.

Love is a choice, friends. It is not so much a feeling or an emotion as much as it is a conscious decision to put God first in our lives. In our families. In our work. In our hearts. Are you seeking the paths of the Lord? Are you committed to walking in His steadfast love and faithfulness? Does your devotion to Jesus trump every other relationship in your life?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 32:1-33:13, Romans 15:23-16:9, Psalms 25:16-22, Proverbs 20:16-18

August 2, 2019
KINGDOM-WORK REQUIRES TEAMWORK

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 32:1-33:13, Romans 15:23-16:9, Psalms 25:16-22, Proverbs 20:16-18

No person is an island. No Kingdom leader every goes it alone. As one celebrity Christian leader falls after another, it is good for us to reflect on Paul's words from Romans 16. Paul is surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. The burden of Paul's work is shared by many. The names are listed for all to see. Phoebe. Pricilla and Aquila. Epenetus. Mary. Andronicus and Junia. Ampliatus. Urbanus and Stachys. These are just a few of the leaders Paul surrounded himself with as he carried the gospel throughout the Mediterranean basin. We also know he journeyed with Barnabus, Luke, John Mark, and several others. The early church was wise to set apart teams of missionaries rather than commission these men to go out on their own.

We would do well to follow their example. We live in a culture that celebrates the myth of the self-made woman or man. The woman who does it all. She has a fast-track career. Perfect kids. Volunteers on the local school board and teaches Bible study at church. The man who does it all. He climbs the corporate ladder. Prays with his kids every night. Serves his wife sacrificially. And is a leader in the community. We celebrate these women and men. We place them on pedestals. We follow them on social media. We read their books and take their advice. We seek to emulate them in all we do. Then they fail. They fall. They have an affair. They embezzle money. Their carefully curated public persona comes crashing down. And we are shattered. So disappointed. So discouraged. So let down.

Why do these things happen? The pattern is now fairly clear. These men and women start to isolate themselves. They separate from their team. They believe their own hype. They put themselves beyond any kind of real accountability. The results are disastrous.

Friends, Kingdom-work is teamwork. Not even the Son of God could do it by himself! Throughout the Scriptures, we see the great leaders of the Bible sharing authority. Moses raises up elders to serve alongside he and Joshua. David has an abundance of counselors to share the load. Jesus calls 12 disciples and the Apostle Paul thanks numerous people at the end of his letters for their support and encouragement and labor in the work of the gospel.

Who's on your team? With whom do you share the burdens of your life with? Are you and your spouse a team in your home? Do you give your children as much authority and responsibility as they can handle as they grow up? Do you share leadership at work? Are you intentionally raising up leaders to take your place? Do you give people around you the freedom to fail and learn from their failures? Do you empower your team to make real decisions and then hold them accountable? Do you submit yourself to accountability? These things are critical if you are going to do God's work over the long haul.

For my part, I am deeply grateful for a group of elders who hold me accountable. They ask about my marriage. They pray for my family. They are not afraid to tell me no. I am deeply grateful for a wife who is a true partner in life and ministry. She gets in my face. Doesn't believe the hype. Brings me back to earth when I need it. I am thankful for my children and the honest relationships we are cultivating with each other. I am thankful for colleagues who ask great, probing, personal questions that make me reflect deeply on life. I am thankful for an accountability partner of almost 20 years who knows everything about me and who challenges me to live more faithfully for Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 33:14-34:33, Romans 16:10-27, Psalms 26, Proverbs 20:19

August 3, 2019
CAN JESUS HOLD THE CENTER?

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 33:14-34:33, Romans 16:10-27, Psalms 26, Proverbs 20:19

I am often struck as I look out on my congregation on Sunday mornings by the diversity present in the room. Old and young. Rich and poor. Men and women. People coming from different backgrounds and life experiences. People who grew up in church sitting next to those who've had no experience with the church. Democrats and Republicans. Highly educated and less educated. White collar and blue collar and no collar. Families from different nations around the globe like India, Malawi, Vietnam, and Costa Rica. We are still predominantly white but have a growing number of black and brown brothers and sisters in our midst. We are able and disabled. We have LGBTQ friends who join us each week. It's an amazing mix of people coming to meet Jesus.

The church of Jesus Christ is a miracle. In Christ, every dividing wall of hostility has been torn down. Every identity that separates us one from another set aside. For Paul, it meant laying aside the centuries-old divisions between Jew and Gentile. Circumcision. Food laws. Sabbath keeping. All de-centered in order to make space for Gentile believers who did not know and had not grown up in a covenant community governed by the Mosaic Law. Sexual immorality. Idolatry. Sorcery and witchcraft. These things Gentiles were called to lay aside as they represented the former life they had before Christ. Only Christ is powerful enough to make this happen and the same is true today. We are so very different from one another. Each one of us unique in our own way. Each one of us sees the world a different way. Growing up in a highly individualized and highly commercialized culture like the US shapes our worldview. We don't know what it means to live in authentic community with each other. And this is why being part of a church is so important.

The church is where we actually get to live out our union with Christ. It tests the depth of our faith on a regular basis. What do we do when someone hurts our feelings? How do we respond when someone lets us down? What happens when we get into a fight with someone because they see the world differently? Will we let the worldly identities we cling to divide us or will we let Christ reign in our hearts and draw us together? This is what Paul is calling for at the end of Romans when he says, "And now I make one more appeal, my dear brothers and sisters. Watch out for people who cause divisions and upset people's faith by teaching things contrary to what you have been taught. Stay away from them." (Romans 16:17)

Of course, all of us are sinners. All of us can be the source of division if we are not careful. So how do we make sure to guard our own heart? Two things. First and foremost, seek the mind of Christ in all you say and do. Make sure every word you speak and every action you take is guided by His wisdom revealed in His Word. When you fall short – as you inevitably will – rest on His forgiveness. Be humble. Extend grace to yourself and others. None of us are perfect. Second, constantly search your heart to make sure you are motivated by the love of Christ. Are these words going to build up my sister or brother or tear them down? Am I really seeking their good? Am I seeking to serve them in love or out of selfish ambition? If you are like me, the temptation to manipulate others to my own ends is strong and has to be resisted on a daily basis.

Friends, Jesus can and does hold the center of our life together. He is strong enough to keep us together when everything else in the world threatens to pull us apart. Christ exerts a gravitational pull on our lives that keeps us in orbit no matter how diverse our fellowship may be or how vast the differences between us. Cling to Christ. Seek the mind of Christ. Be motivated by the love of Christ. Live from your union with Christ that He died to secure for all eternity.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 35-36, 1 Corinthians 1:1-17, Psalms 27:1-6, Proverbs 20:20-21

August 4 2019
READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: 2 Chronicles 35-36, 1 Corinthians 1:1-17, Psalms 27:1-6, Proverbs 20:20-21

Readings for TOMORROW: Ezra 1-2, 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5, Psalms 27:7-14, Proverbs 20:22-23

August 5, 2019
DIVINE FOOLISHNESS

Readings for today: Ezra 1-2, 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5, Psalms 27:7-14, Proverbs 20:22-23

I recently read a book titled, “The Enigma of Reason” where the authors argue persuasively that reason – far from being the evolutionary superpower we make it out to be – is deeply flawed and never objective. In fact, they believe what we call “reason” is simply one way of drawing inferences about the world around us. It’s far more instinctual than we like to think. It is driven by desire more than logic and we are far more likely to use “reason” to confirm our existing biases than we are to actually make decisions based on the evidence presented to us.

I thought about that book again this morning as we read about the differences between God’s wisdom and human wisdom in 1 Corinthians. God’s way are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts. What human beings consider “wisdom” results in all kinds of tragedy. Consider the “logic” of racism. The persistent idea that the color of one’s skin determines the value of one’s worth. Consider the “logic” of greed. The persistent idea that we should spend our days accumulating as much as possible and those who are successful are somehow “better” than those who are not. Consider the “logic” of gender dysphoria. The idea that we can choose our own gender and deny our chromosomal reality. Consider the “logic” of sexual freedom. The idea that we should offer our bodies to whoever we wish as long as their is consent. Such logic is terrifying and tragic and deeply heartbreaking. It is resulting in deep loneliness, suffering, and pain. It should not surprise us as we pursue human wisdom that things only seem to be getting worse. Rates of depression and suicide are on the rise. So are rates of reported mental illness. At what point do we stop and reflect on the fact that following human “logic” may be the latest form of self-harm?

Paul says “the message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction. But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God.” This is not a triumphalistic statement rather one written in tears. Paul surveys the landscape of his own culture and his heart breaks to see so many enslaved to their sinful desires. He spends his life trying to break their chains and set them free. He longs for the day when Christ will appear and all things will be made new. Until that day comes, he calls us Christians to proclaim the “foolishness” of God. God has put to shame the wisdom of this world. He uses the foolishness of preaching to proclaim His victory over sin and death. The idea that God would give His life to save His people makes no human sense whatsoever. Why would God do such a thing? How in the world can this be just? Righteous? Even logical or rational? Furthermore, why would God gather His church from all the poor and powerless? Why does He use the weak to shame the strong? Why does He use the foolish to confound the wise? Why does He use those who’ve been despised to expose the vanity and empty pride of our world?

He does it for His glory. He does it in order to make His glory known. No one can take credit for what God has done. Why would anyone even want to? God left heaven and came to earth. Relinquished all His power and authority in order to become a human being. He humbled Himself in obedience to the point of death. Even death on a cross. The worst and most shameful death ever devised by the wisdom of man. Because Christ embraced this descent, God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name above every name. And now He calls those who follow Christ to walk the same path. To take the same journey.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 3:1-4:23, 1 Corinthians 2:6-3:4, Psalms 28, Proverbs 20:24-25

August 6, 2019
REBUILDING

Readings for today: Ezra 3:1-4:23, 1 Corinthians 2:6-3:4, Psalms 28, Proverbs 20:24-25

Our God specializes in rebuilding. He takes what is broken and He builds it back up. He takes what is ruined and He raises it back up. He takes what's been torn down and He pulls it back together. We see it over and over again throughout the Scriptures. After Adam and Eve sin, humanity descends into evil and chaos resulting in a great flood. God rebuilds using Noah. Humanity scatters in confusion at the Tower of Babel when their languages are disrupted. God rebuilds using Abram. Abram's descendants are enslaved and brutally oppressed in Egypt. God rebuilds using Moses. Israel plunges into complete anarchy at the end of the Book of Judges. God rebuilds using a prophet named Samuel and a king named David. Both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel fall into idolatry and are invaded. Their way of life destroyed and the people carried off into exile. God rebuilds using men like Nehemiah, Ezra, and Zerubbabel.

God rebuilds His Temple. God rebuilds His city. Most importantly, God rebuilds His people. He brings them back home just as He promised. He stirs the heart of a pagan king. A Persian named Cyrus who has destroyed the Babylonian empire. A royal decree is issued. Sacred elements are gathered. The people begin their journey back home. It's a massive undertaking involving thousands of people. Genealogical records are consulted to make sure the leaders all come from the correct lineage. Those eligible for the priesthood are identified. Those eligible to serve from the Levite tribe are identified. The direct descendants of the temple servants and royal servants are identified so they can all be restored to their rightful place, God leaving no detail left to chance. When they arrive, the first thing they do is rebuild the altar so they can worship. They keep the Feast of Booths according to God's Word. And most importantly, they lay the foundation of a new Temple which causes the old to weep and the young to praise. It had to be quite a moment.

Sadly sin will run its course once more. God's people will struggle and suffer yet again. As Daniel foretold, they will become a pawn in a much greater conflict as kingdoms clash over the legacy left by Alexander the Great. Eventually, Rome will rise and crush all in her path. Herod the Great will be installed as a "client king" set to rule over Israel. In a bid to curry favor, he will refurbish the Temple but his corruption and penchant for violence is evident to all. Tensions rise. Factions jockey for power and influence. Israel is a powder keg ready to blow at anytime. And into this mess, a baby is born. A child grows up. His name is Jesus. Come to save His people from their sins. Come to rebuild the ancient ruins. Come to restore God's Kingdom once and for all. He dies on a cross. An apparent failure. But three days later, He rises from the dead in glorious triumph! Delivering the final, decisive blow to sin and evil in this world. Right before He ascends into heaven, He commissions His disciples. His followers. Those who would eventually be called "Christians" to carry on His rebuilding work. Armed with tools like compassion and grace and mercy, they are to go out into the world proclaiming the gospel to every tribe, tongue and nation. They are charged to build up a spiritual house. Equipping the saints for the work of God's Kingdom.

So what about you? Where is God at work in your life today? Where is He rebuilding? Where is He restoring? How is He using you to rebuild and restore others in His name? What about our country? How are you at work in the midst of the chaos and hate and violence of our culture to bring joy and peace? Love and hope?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 4:24-6:22, 1 Corinthians 3:5-23, Psalms 29, Proverbs 20:26-27

August 7, 2019
CULT OF CELEBRITY

Readings for today: Ezra 4:24-6:22, 1 Corinthians 3:5-23, Psalms 29, Proverbs 20:26-27

Our culture is obsessed with celebrity. Entire news cycle are devoted to the latest gossip. What's he or she wearing this season? Who's hooked up with whom? When is she due and what are they naming their kid? What's the latest scandal? Who's life is crashing and burning? We follow them on Instagram and Twitter. We repost and retweet. We are desperate for their attention. Desperate to be associated with them. Desperate to be like them.

Sadly, the same is true in the church. Celebrity preachers amass thousands of followers. They are measured by the number of people who come on a Sunday morning. The number of sites they launch for their church. The number of hits on their podcast. The number of followers on social media. They sell books. They sell merchandise. They do everything they can to promote their brand.

Over and against all this come the words of the Apostle Paul, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each." (1 Corinthians 3:5) Paul gets it. Of all the leaders in the early church, Paul was probably the most prominent. His missionary journeys were the stuff of legends. His church planting prowess second to none. His influence was global. His words were read and distributed all across the Mediterranean. His personal story of sacrifice and perseverance in the face of incredible persecution was inspiring. And yet, Paul considered himself nothing. He called himself a servant. He never gave into the temptation of self-promotion. He never tried to advance his "brand."

How was Paul able to stay humble in a world hellbent on the accumulation of fortune and fame? He kept his eyes on Christ. "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." (1 Cor. 3:6-7) Paul understood all of his success came from God. He simply played his role. He planted the church. Apollos watered the church through his charismatic preaching. Others joined in and lent a hand. And it was God who brought the increase.

Paul understood this wasn't about him. "According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it." (1 Cor. 3:10) God had saved him. God had literally turned his life around. God had taken the greatest persecutor the church had ever known and turned him to her greatest missionary. Paul had been a Pharisee. A leader among the religious elite. His zealotry for the Law of God was beyond question. His passion for Yahweh and the Jewish faith unmatched. His devotion to the traditions of his people unwavering. And then the Risen Christ confronted him on the road outside Damascus. Changed by God's amazing grace, Paul's life literally took an 180 degree turn. Now he was called to lay the foundation for the early church. Others would come after him to build on what he started. All of it belonging to God.

I love how Paul concludes this section of his letter to the Corinthians. "So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's." (1 Corinthians 3:21-23) What amazing promises! God has sent His Christ into the world to reclaim His own. Christ has sent His people into the world to proclaim the gospel. All things are therefore ours not by virtue of our faith but because Christ Himself is faithful. Do not place your trust in any man. Do not place your trust in any woman. Do not put any human being on a pedestal. Fix your eyes on Christ! Make Him your supreme treasure!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 7:1-8:20, 1 Corinthians 4, Psalms 30, Proverbs 20:28-30

August 8, 2019
TRUE GREATNESS

Readings for today: Ezra 7:1-8:20, 1 Corinthians 4, Psalms 30, Proverbs 20:28-30

“For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.” (1 Corinthians 4:9-13)

These are some of Paul's most powerful words. I love the vision he sets for himself. He clings to nothing in this world. He refuses to trade his soul for any material gain. He relinquishes power and privilege. He easily lays down his rights as an apostle. He embraces weakness. Folly. Shame. He lets go of the need to be wealthy and healthy and wise. He doesn't care about his reputation. When attacked, he responds with kindness. When persecuted, he perseveres. When people speak or think ill of him, he extends grace. This world holds nothing for Paul. He understands it will all pass away. We enter this world with nothing. We will depart with nothing. From dust we came and to dust we shall return. The only thing that matters is Christ. The only work that will endure is that done in His name and for His glory. The only wealth that will last is that which we store up in heaven. The only reputation we should care about is our reputation before God.

Scum of the earth. The refuse of all things. The first shall be last. The greatest among you shall be a servant. If any would come after me, let him take up his cross. What does it profit a man to gain the whole world but lose his soul? Friends, the Bible cannot be more clear. The path to true greatness is the path of service. The path of humility. Downward mobility. We must decrease so Christ can increase. This is why Jesus said the path was so narrow that led to salvation.

Many years ago, in a time of prayer, I asked the Lord to reveal His specific will for my life. He gave me three words. Obscurity. Anonymity. Insignificance. I asked the Lord, “What do these words mean?” He answered. “Be content to labor in obscurity. Let go of your need to be respected and well-known. To be successful in the eyes of your peers. To have the biggest and best church.” Second, “Embrace anonymity. Let go of your need to make your own name great. To make a name for yourself in the world. Instead, do all you can to lift up My Name. To make My name famous.” Third, “Recognize your insignificance. Even at your best, your work is but a drop in the bucket. A blip on the radar screen. It will come and go in a moment. Your significance is not derived from what you do or what you have to offer or what you accomplish in this life. You have significance only through Me.”

It was a powerful moment for me. One that I will never forget. These three words have guided my life. They are the guardrails that keep me humble. They keep my pride from rising up and driving me from the presence of the Lord. Whenever I feel distant from God, I return to these words. I evaluate my life. And I confess my sins. Through Christ, my ambitions have crumbled. My desires have changed. My addiction to worldly success has been broken. I've been set free.

I want nothing more in life than to be a fool for Christ. Weak for Christ's sake. Shamed for Christ's sake. For Christ is the Lord of my shame. Christ is glorified in my weakness. Christ's wisdom is magnified in my foolishness. All that I have. All that I am. All that I desire. All for Christ. This has become my prayer and my plea.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 8:21-9:15, 1 Corinthians 5, Psalms 31:1-8, Proverbs 21:1-2

August 9, 2019
CULTURAL BLINDERS

Readings for today: Ezra 8:21-9:15, 1 Corinthians 5, Psalms 31:1-8, Proverbs 21:1-2

Today's reading - which finishes in chapter 10 - definitely presents a challenge. Particularly since we live so far removed from the specific cultural situation Ezra faced as the Israelites returned from exile. It is deeply offensive to our 21st century sensibilities to imagine a group of men initiating a mass divorce simply over race and/or nationality. We rightly wonder what happens to the women and children who are kicked to the curb? Are they left destitute? Is this of the will of God? Or was this an example of early Pharisaism rearing its ugly head? Zealousness for the Law of God taken to a logical extreme? Moreover, many wonder if this is yet another example of God's Law remaining culturally bound? Irrelevant to our modern lives? After all, how can we respect a God who commands the breakup of so many families?

This is what makes Bible reading such a challenge. We can't just read the words on the page and accept them at face value. We have to dive deeper to understand the cultural currents of the day and how this story fits if we want to understand. Furthermore, we have to acknowledge the cultural assumptions we ourselves bring to the text. We are not objective observers. We too have biases and perspectives that are shaped by current cultural movements like #MeToo, feminism, and, at a more fundamental level, the US Bill of Rights that will shape how we respond to the text. It's hard to lay these things aside and try to walk a mile in Ezra's shoes.

So why was Ezra so upset over the intermarriage of Israel with their pagan neighbors? And why does he call for them to "put aside" the foreign women and their children? And what were the social ramifications of such a drastic move? First and foremost, we need to understand that in ancient near east culture, ethnicity, tribal identity, and religion all overlapped. You see something similar in the world today where Islam is so closely identified with the Arabic ethnicity. Tribal kingdoms were defined in a very real sense according to the god they worshiped. Each nation had their own god and their own unique religious practices. Their god ruled over a specific territorial boundary which defined the geographic limits of a particular kingdom. Other features that defined tribal and/or national identity had to do with the personality of the king who ruled, the language they spoke, and then, downstream from the rest, the particular physical features of the people themselves. One can see how different this is from modern racial theory forged in the wake of the horrors of the Holocaust and ethnic purges of the last 150 years.

From a Biblical standpoint then, if one married a pagan, one pledged allegiance in a certain sense to their god. This obviously represents a fundamental break with the First Commandment which is why Ezra reacts so strongly to the news. Furthermore, intermarriage also brought into question one's tribal and/or national identity. It was an open question whether one could actually be an Israelite if one married a non-Israelite. One would always be suspect as would one's children. If/when an invasion took place, whose side would you be on? Could you be trusted? All these were very real questions for a fragile group of people seeking to reestablish themselves and rebuild their nation. Certainly there were options for non-Israelites to become Israelites. The book of Ruth is a great example and a story the people in Ezra's time would have known well. However, in order to become an Israelite one had to renounce any connection to their former god and their former people. "Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16)

Hopefully, this helps us understand Ezra's dilemma and heartbreak. He is ashamed. He is afraid. He knows his history well and he knows what happens when God's people are unfaithful. "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt. And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today." (Ezra 9:6-7) He tears his robe. He rips his beard. He falls on his face before God and intercedes for the people.

As he prays, a few men come forward with a solution. What if everyone who has taken a foreign wife puts her aside? What if they separated out the foreign women and children as an act of repentance? This seems good to Ezra. The proclamation goes forth. Those found guilty repent. And the story ends. We don't know how it turns out for the women and children. Are they simply cast aside? Left to fend for themselves? Surely not as God's Law is just as clear about how we treat the foreigner and stranger and most vulnerable in our midst as it is about intermarriage.

So what happened? No one can say with certainty. I can only here offer a modern day analogy. In many places in Africa, it is common for men to take more than one wife. Polygamy is not God's design for marriage so when given the chance, I've encouraged them to choose one wife and essentially "put away" the others. They remain in the household under the economic care and protection of the man of the house but he lives in covenant faithfulness with only one woman. He provides for them. He takes care of their children. He still fulfills all his responsibilities as a husband and father so they are not left destitute on the streets. It's not a perfect solution but it is one offered in an attempt to bring the family into covenant faithfulness to the gospel.

So where do you find yourself today? What does covenant faithfulness look like for you? Where are you living in covenant obedience? Where are you living in disobedience? Is your heart grieved by the brokenness and sin of your life?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 10, 1 Corinthians 6, Psalms 31:9-18, Proverbs 21:3

August 10, 2019
BOUGHT WITH A PRICE

Readings for today: Ezra 10, 1 Corinthians 6, Psalms 31:9-18, Proverbs 21:3

“You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

Our world is increasingly moving away from God. We reject God’s Law. We ignore God’s commands. We purposefully and intentionally rebel against God’s will. Take the Ten Commandments for example. Our culture celebrates greed or what the Bible calls “coveting.” We are becoming more and more comfortable with deceit, fake news, or what the Bible calls “false witness.” Stealing is acceptable as long as we don’t get caught. Sexual immorality is okay as long as it feels good. Murder is considered a “choice” especially when it comes to the unborn or the elderly. Families are breaking down as we dishonor our parents. Sabbath-keeping is a total lost cause. As are the first three commandments about honoring God. When one takes a step back and surveys the landscape, one can easily see the coordinated effort of the enemy.

Nothing is new under the sun. Our world today is no better or worse than the 1st century. The enemy is not all that creative. His tactics always remain the same. He does all he can to destroy the works of God in every culture, in every time, and every place. So if the words of the Apostle Paul to the believers at Corinth sound familiar at all, that shouldn’t surprise us. We are still dealing with sexual immorality. Still dealing with idolatry. Still dealing with stealing and deceit. Still dealing with addiction and suffering.

The great news is that God is still at work as well. Still reaching people. Still transforming hearts. Still changing lives. Why do we keep the Law of God? Why do we live lives of honor and honesty? Why do we live lives of faithfulness and sexual purity? Why do we live lives of kindness and humility? We do these things not to earn God’s favor. Not to gain our way into heaven. Not to make God love us. We do these things because we’ve been bought with a price. We do these things out of gratitude for what Christ has done for us. Laying down His life in order to save us from our sin.

I love how Paul puts it, “But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Corinthians 6:11) You see, without Christ we are enslaved to sin. We can’t help ourselves. We are broken people. Our desires are all disordered. Our minds are warped and twisted. Our wants and needs are self-centered. It’s not that we can’t do anything good. Of course we can. It’s that even at our best we are corrupt. Even our best laid plans go awry. Even our greatest ideas for human flourishing fall short. Human history is replete with legions of examples.

So how are you intentionally glorifying your body? More importantly, why are you glorifying God in your body? Does it flow from a deep well of gratitude for what He’s done for you? Does it rest on His finished work on the cross? Do you have the sense that you are building your life on the foundation He has poured? Or are you trying to white-knuckle your faith? Trying to keep the Law of God in your own strength or because you’re trying to earn your way into God’s favor? Let me encourage you to reflect deeply on Paul’s words from 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. Pay attention to the progression. You are not your own. You were bought with a price. So glorify God with your body. Resist the temptation to reverse engineer the process. Let His grace fill you. Lead you. Guide you. Secure you.

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 1:1-3:14, 1 Corinthians 7:1-24, Psalms 31:19-24, Proverbs 21:4

August 11, 2019
READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Nehemiah 1:1-3:14, 1 Corinthians 7:1-24, Psalms 31:19-24, Proverbs 21:4

Readings for TOMORROW: Nehemiah 3:15-5:13, 1 Corinthians 7:25-40, Psalms 32, Proverbs 21:5-7

August 12, 2019
THE HARD WORK OF PRAYER

Readings for today: Nehemiah 3:15-5:13, 1 Corinthians 7:25-40, Psalms 32, Proverbs 21:5-7

What is your first response when facing a crisis? What is your initial instinct when you receive bad news? When life seems to be falling apart, what do you turn to? For many, it is alcohol or drugs. Opioids. Marijuana. Psychedelics. All are readily available in my community. For many, it is sex. Porn. Tinder. Hook-up apps. All pose very real temptations to those who in need of a “fix.” For many, it is work. Longer hours. Longer days. More gratification. More achievement. More success. It can be intoxicating. However, all these behaviors only postpone the inevitable. At some point in time, we have to face our fear. We have to enter the darkness. We have to deal with the heartbreak and pain.

Nehemiah receives the worst news imaginable. He had asked about his people. How many had survived? How many were still living in Jerusalem? What was life like for them? The news was grim. The people were helpless. Vulnerable. Weak. They were barely hanging on. Without a wall to protect them, there was no way they would survive. So how does Nehemiah respond? With prayer and fasting. Weeping and mourning before the Lord for days. Many would argue he’s wasting valuable time. He should use his position of influence to get what he needs to save his people. He should run to the king immediately to let him know what’s happening. He should organize protests! Pass laws! Crash the system! Why waste time in prayer? Surely God understands! And can’t Nehemiah pray along the way? Why now? Why wait? When there’s so much work to be done?

We live in a busy world. A world that puts the pedal to the metal 24/7. A world that sets a relentless pace. It is easy to get caught up in the race. It is easy to pull up anchor and let yourself be driven by all the activities and opportunities the world puts in front of us. It’s easy to go from crisis to crisis without ever stopping to ask why? Why am I trying so hard? Why am I running so hard? What am I trying to avoid? Who am I trying to impress? What’s the cost? Prayer forces us to slow down. It forces us to sit in the Lord’s presence and wait for His Word. Prayer silences the cacophony of voices that fill our head every single day. Or at least quiets them for a few moments. Prayer brings us in touch with what is truly real and noble and true and allows us to identify the lies we so often believe. Prayer gives time for wisdom to sink in. For plans to be made. For actions to be mapped out.

Consider again the example of Nehemiah. After praying and fasting for days, he wipes his tears and resumes his post as cupbearer before the king. The king sensed his mood however and asked him what was wrong. Nehemiah clearly had prepared for this moment. When asked, he laid out his concern and his plan. “I said to the king, “Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” Then the king said to me, “What are you requesting?” So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ graves, that I may rebuild it.” And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), “How long will you be gone, and when will you return?” So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king’s forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.” And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.” (Nehemiah 2:3-8) Nehemiah left nothing to chance. In prayer, he had sought the wisdom and counsel of God. He waited for days until the Lord revealed His will. He emptied himself through fasting in order that he may receive. And God was faithful. God gave him a plan to present to the king. Furthermore, because Nehemiah appealed to God first, God gave him favor when it came time to appeal to the king.

Too often prayer is an afterthought. A last resort. Something we do when it’s time to “break glass in case of emergency.” Too often we look at prayer as a passive exercise. We assume it is a way of avoiding hard work or hard conversations. We don’t value prayer as we should. Instead, we are people of action. We want to move and

move now! We want to act and act now! We demand instant gratification and instant success and instant feedback. Especially in a social media world. But prayer is vital to the life of a believer. It slows us down. It calms us down. It gives us perspective. It makes space for wisdom. All good things in our world today!

What's your prayer life like? Do you make time to pray each day? What do you pray for? Wisdom? Understanding? Insight? Strength? Peace? All these things and more are available to you through our Heavenly Father. All you have to do is ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened.

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 5:14-7:72, 1 Corinthians 8, Psalms 33:1-11, Proverbs 21:8-10

August 13, 2019
RELINQUISHING OUR RIGHTS

Readings for today: Nehemiah 5:14-7:72, 1 Corinthians 8, Psalms 33:1-11, Proverbs 21:8-10

We live in a nation founded on the notion that human beings are endowed with inalienable rights. Life. Liberty. The pursuit of happiness. We further enshrine our rights in the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights which includes the right to freedom of speech, religion, press, assembly, and petition. The right to bear arms and the right to refuse to quarter soldiers in one's home. Protections against unlawful search and seizure and self-incrimination. The right to a speedy, public trial by a jury of one's peers where the accused gets to confront those testifying against them. So on and so forth. It's a transcendent document that forms the basis of our legal system where we go to protect our rights. Fight for our rights. Defend our rights.

But what if God calls you to give up your rights? What if God calls you to relinquish your rights? To lay them down for the sake of others? Would you be willing to do so?

The Apostle Paul lays down his rights and he calls his Corinthian brothers and sisters to do the same. Especially in the matter of meat sacrificed to idols. It seems some in the church felt that any meat sacrificed to idols was tainted. Impure. Unholy. To eat such meat was to participate in pagan practices that dishonored God. Paul disagreed but willingly gave up meat in order to prevent his brothers and sisters from stumbling into sin. "But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak... And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble." (1 Corinthians 8:9, 11-13)

Nehemiah lays down his rights. He understood that if he took what was his right as governor, it would place an undue burden on the people. It would increase their suffering. So he deliberately relinquishes what was a major part of his salary in order to provide more for the people. He deliberately goes without – sending his servants to work on the wall - so that work of protecting Jerusalem can be finished more quickly. He understands that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few and he sacrifices for the greater good. "The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people. Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people." (Nehemiah 5:15-19)

What about us? We are in the midst of a national gun debate once again. Mass shootings are far too common in our country and statistically speaking, the single greatest contributing factor seems to be the ease by which people gain access to these dangerous firearms. Yes, the Second Amendment clearly protects our right to bear arms. But might I suggest our founders could never have envisioned a world where weapons can kill at such a rapid rate and cause such mass destruction? Furthermore, there are clearly people in our society who have no idea how to handle the responsibility of bearing arms. Can we not lay down our rights for the weaker brothers and sisters among us? Put in place some basic protections to restrict access only to those who are willing to take their responsibilities as gun owners seriously?

We are also in the midst of a national debate about income inequality. The gap between the rich and poor is growing despite our robust economy. CEO's of the nation's largest firms continue to see dramatic increases in compensation while lower level workers don't get a fair shake. Unrestrained capitalism is a scary thing because of the nature of human sin. Left to our own devices – with no restrictions whatsoever - we will look out for ourselves rather than for others. We will seek to get as much as we can while we can and leave others behind.

Can we not lay down our rights for those who are less fortunate? What would happen if CEO's and corporate titans willingly relinquished their right to high pay, stock options, etc. in order to serve their employees?

The answer is not demonization. Christians must categorically reject the calls from certain political leaders to demonize gun owners and corporate leaders just as we categorically reject calls from other political leaders demonizing people on the basis of race or immigration status. Instead, all of us must search our own hearts to find ways we can lay down our rights for the sake of those we serve. Governmental coercion is not the answer as it only breeds resentment and fear. What we need is for the people of God to step forward as Paul did in his day and Nehemiah did in his day to lead a movement whereby we lay down our lives for the sake of our friends, neighbors and communities. We relinquish our rights so that those who are weaker, less fortunate, less able, less privileged can rise up. We sacrifice to create a rising tide that lifts all boats. This is the call of the gospel.

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 7:73-9:21, 1 Corinthians 9:1-18, Psalms 33:12-22, Proverbs 21:11-12

August 14, 2019
REHEARSING OUR STORY

Readings for today: Nehemiah 7:73-9:21, 1 Corinthians 9:1-18, Psalms 33:12-22, Proverbs 21:11-12

Creation. Abraham. Egypt. Exodus. Judges. Promised Land. Kings. Temple. Priests. Prophets. Exile. Return. Whenever the people of God renew their covenant with the Lord, they take time to remember their story. They understood their current situation was but the latest link in a chain of events stretching all the way back to the Garden. All the way back to God Himself at the dawn of creation. But for God, they would have been destroyed. But for God, they would have been erased. But for God, there would be no history. No story to tell. Listen to them tell it again and think about how far they've come...

"You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you. You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. You found his heart faithful before you, and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite. And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous. "And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted arrogantly against our fathers. And you made a name for yourself, as it is to this day. And you divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on dry land, and you cast their pursuers into the depths, as a stone into mighty waters. By a pillar of cloud you led them in the day, and by a pillar of fire in the night to light for them the way in which they should go. You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, and you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant. You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them. "But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, 'This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,' and had committed great blasphemies, you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell. "And you gave them kingdoms and peoples and allotted to them every corner. So they took possession of the land of Sihon king of Heshbon and the land of Og king of Bashan. You multiplied their children as the stars of heaven, and you brought them into the land that you had told their fathers to enter and possess. So the descendants went in and possessed the land, and you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of the land, that they might do with them as they would. And they captured fortified cities and a rich land, and took possession of houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchards and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness. "Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies. Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. And in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies. But after they had rest they did evil again before you, and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them. Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you delivered them according to your mercies. And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person

does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear. Therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. "Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day. Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them. Even in their own kingdom, and amid your great goodness that you gave them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you or turn from their wicked works. Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress." (Nehemiah 9:6-37)

Those of you who have been tracking with us through the Bible this year know these stories. You read them in great detail. You pondered them. You prayed over them. You listened for the voice of God in them. Many of you grew frustrated at times. You couldn't understand why they kept making the same mistakes. You got angry at times. You couldn't understand the righteous judgment of God. Many of you laughed and cried and wrestled and struggled with the lessons the people were learning. About themselves. About their God. About His plan and His future.

It's important for us to remember this story. To read it over and over again for it is our story as well. As Christians, we are grafted into this story. Adopted into this family. Warts and all. These people are our people. They are our mothers and fathers. Sisters and brothers in the faith. And we are so like them. If we're honest with ourselves, we too make the same mistakes over and over again. We too sin and fall short of the glory of God. We too deserve judgment and death. Punishment and exile. But we have the benefit of living after Christ. Jesus Christ took the punishment we deserved. He went into exile for us. He endured the righteous wrath of God so we do not. He stood in our place just as surely as He stands in the place of the Old Testament saints who came before us. He is Savior of the world. Past. Present. Future. He is the Alpha and Omega. Beginning and End. His blood is sufficient to cover every sin. Christ came as the climax of this history. He is the One to whom the Old Testament points. He is the One in whom all prophecies are fulfilled. He is the One every single saint from Abraham forward looked to by faith.

I don't know about you but I get discouraged at times. I look at all the pain and suffering in the world around me and in the lives of those I love and I feel doubts creep in. Fears begin to stir. Anxiety rises. I get worried. Reading and rehearsing the story gives me hope. It lifts my eyes above the dark circumstances of my life to the light revealed in God's purpose and plan. It moves me from fear to faith. From grief to gratitude. God is on the move! He will be faithful to His promises! He will bring to completion the good work He's begun!

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 9:22-10:39, 1 Corinthians 9:19-10:13, Psalms 34:1-10, Proverbs 21:13

August 15, 2019
ESSENTIALS AND NON-ESSENTIALS

Readings for today: Nehemiah 9:22-10:39, 1 Corinthians 9:19-10:13, Psalms 34:1-10, Proverbs 21:13

There is an ancient phrase attributed to Saint Augustine that states, “In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.” It is a beautiful and wise way to live one’s life. We all have core beliefs that cannot be compromised. Core ideas that make us who we are. They are essential to our being. For example, all human beings have a desire to be loved. All human beings have a desire for significance. All human beings have a desire to be accepted for who they are. These traits are part of what it means to be “essentially” human. Of course, we all have opinions. We all have different ideas on politics, faith, lifestyles, etc. We have a myriad of different thoughts on these subjects but if we make them essential. That is to say, if I condition my relationships based on what side of the political aisle one falls then I have made something that is non-essential an essential which results in deep brokenness.

One of the things I love about the Apostle Paul is how he is able to remain focused on the main thing. He keeps his eyes firmly fixed on the gospel and lets nothing get in the way of its proclamation to the ends of the earth. He has a phenomenal ability to see past his own cultural blinders and help others do the same. Listen to what he writes to the Corinthians. “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.” (1 Corinthians 9:19-23) Paul understands his calling. He is to win as many people as he can for Jesus. He is to preach and proclaim to as many people groups as possible. He is to share with Jew and Gentile alike the good news. He never lets anything get in the way of his calling. Not hardship or persecution. Not imprisonment or false accusations. Not discouragement or despair. Yes, I am sure he experienced all these things and more along the way but they never quite gained purchase in his life. He always seemed able to beat them back with the grace of Christ. Paul’s greatest desire was to see all people be saved and come to a knowledge of God’s truth. Is it ours as well?

We often pray in our church family for God to give us his eyes to see and his heart for the world around us. What does that mean? It means we live or die with the gospel. It means we grieve deeply over the unbelief of our loved ones, friends, and neighbors. It means our hearts ache in the face of the gross injustices of our world. It means we throw a party and celebrate every time a single sinner repents and comes to faith. It means we wake up every morning prepared to do battle with principalities and powers. The gospel is the most essential. Most foundational. Most fundamental truth of our existence. It shapes who we are. It defines us. It gives us a new identity altogether.

Ask yourself an honest question this morning...would your life be any different if Jesus were not in it? Would you treat people any differently? Work any differently? Spend money differently? Vote differently? If you woke up this morning to the news that they had found the body of Jesus in some unmarked grave in Israel and the whole “Christian project” came crashing down around, how would it impact your day to day? Is the gospel the most essential thing in your life? Is it core to who you are? Or is it non-essential? Do you accessorize your life with a little Jesus? Throw him a bone from time to time?

These are not easy questions for us to answer probably because all of us know instinctually that Jesus is not as core as he should be to our lives. Friends, the journey of following Jesus is a journey to the center of our existence. It is a journey to the heart of who we are. It requires us to drill down as deeply as possible. To get past all the trivial and mundane. All the superficial and insignificant. It requires us to relinquish and surrender everything that is important to us so that we might cling to Christ alone.

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 11:1-12:26, 1 Corinthians 10:14-33, Psalms 34:11-22, Proverbs 21:14-16

August 16, 2019
PRAYING THE PSALMS

Readings for today: Nehemiah 11:1-12:26, 1 Corinthians 10:14-33, Psalms 34:11-22, Proverbs 21:14-16

The Psalms are the prayer book of the Bible. 150 prayers written by God's people. Written in times of celebration. Commemorating great victories and triumphs. Written in the midst of despair, exile, and defeat. Written for use in worship like the Psalms of Ascent. Written for very specific occasions. Written in the midst of real life.

David is on the run. He is being pursued by his own people. Betrayed by his own king. Unjustly accused. He has lost his position. His home. His family. One would think such circumstances would lead to bitterness and despair. Anger and frustration. Fear and uncertainty. These are honest feelings and David doesn't shy away from acknowledging them. "Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away. Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach, especially to my neighbors, and an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have been forgotten like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. For I hear the whispering of many— terror on every side!— as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life." (Psalms 31:9-13) One can hear in his words the anguish and heartbreak. He is afraid. He doesn't know what the future holds. There are no guarantees he will escape. So he brings these feelings authentically before the Lord. He humbles himself before his God. He knows the Lord sees his afflictions.

At the same time, David prays in faith for his very real needs. He prays for God's protection. "In you, O Lord, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me! Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily! Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me!" (Psalms 31:1-2)

He prays for God's guidance and wisdom. "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple. For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock." (Psalms 27:4-5)

He prays for God's comfort and provision. "When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all." (Psalms 34:17-19)

And most of all, David lifts his eyes above his current circumstances to praise God for who He is! God is worthy of praise even when we find ourselves in the middle of the most difficult times of our lives. "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad. Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together!" (Psalms 34:1-3)

One of the greatest lies the enemy tries to tell us is that our needs don't matter to God. They are too small. Too insignificant to demand His attention. The enemy tries to convince us that we are a burden to our Heavenly Father and praying authentically somehow makes us unholy or unworthy. David teaches us otherwise. He is raw. He is real. He is emotional. He is bold. He enjoys such close intimate fellowship with God that he can literally tell God anything. And that is what God desires from everyone of His children.

What is your prayer life like? Is it real? Authentic? Or are there things you are afraid to share with your Heavenly Father? Areas of your life you try to hide? Do you fear coming into His presence? Afraid of what He might do? What He might say? What He might think? Do you trust God's gracious character? His unconditional love? His mercies which are new every morning? Do you believe God is generous towards you? Having an inexhaustible supply of time and attention? Do you know nothing is insignificant to God? Not one need. Not one desire. Do you bring your requests humbly before Him, trusting He knows best what you need? I'd encourage you to use the Psalms as a model, a guide, for your prayers. Let David lead you to a deeper understanding of your relationship with God.

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 12:27-13:31, 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, Psalms 35:1-16, Proverbs 21:17-18

August 17, 2019
CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

Readings for today: Nehemiah 12:27-13:31, 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, Psalms 35:1-16, Proverbs 21:17-18

“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1)

There is only one litmus test for a truly Christian leader. Do they imitate Christ? Do their lives reflect the humility and sacrifice of Christ? Do they seek to serve and give their lives as a ransom for many? Do they pick up their cross? Do they practice self-denial for the sake of others? Do they actively align their lives with Scripture and live according to God’s commands? Do they love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength? Do they love their neighbor – as Jesus defined “neighbor” - as themselves?

We live in a world where godly leadership seems scarce. Our politicians are corrupt. Our business leaders are greedy. Our pastors are self-promoting. Our social media celebrities narcissistic. The list of those who abuse their positions of power and exploit the system for their own gain seems endless. These are the ones who get all the press. These are the ones who get all the run in the media. These are the ones we follow on Instagram and Twitter and who appear on the grocery store rags. And it is easy to get discouraged.

But then I think of the young man I know in Washington DC who serves Jesus as a congressional aide. He works tirelessly to make the world a better place by shaping public policy. I think of the small business owner who goes about her work everyday with integrity. Cares for her employees. Pays them a fair wage and sacrifices personally to make her business grow so she can bless her community. I think of the small town pastor who offers the invocation at the local high school football game, visits his people when they are sick, preaches the Word faithfully and well, and does all he can to make his community a better place. I think of the single mom who works two jobs as she raises her kids. She makes incredible sacrifices to get them to school, practice, and eventually pay for college. I think of the church planters I know who leave their homes and families and tribes to go to unreached villages where the name of Jesus has yet to be heard. I think of the pastor I know who risks his life to save North Korean women held as sex slaves along the Chinese border.

Perhaps our problem isn’t the lack of godly leadership in the world as much as we keep looking in the wrong places. Elevating the wrong people. Paying attention to those whose erratic, extreme, and ungodly behavior makes for good headlines. Perhaps if we unfollowed the celebrities. Stopped watching cable news. Ignored the tabloids. And instead spent our time lifting up and encouraging and imitating the godly leaders we know in our lives, the world might soon become a better place?

As hard as it may be to believe, Paul was no celebrity. The Roman Empire was a big place and there was a lot going on. The centers of power and focus of attention was the emperor’s court. The march of the legions. The mob in Rome itself. No one much cared about a Jewish Pharisee from a backwater province moving from urban center to urban center planting small communities of people who committed themselves to the way of Jesus. Paul missionary journeys would not have trended on Twitter. Never would have made the evening news. No talking heads would have wasted their time on him. Even at the end of his life, he was so insignificant the Roman officials basically ignored him once he was on house arrest until his eventual execution. And yet within a couple of hundred years, these little communities Paul started would literally overrun the Empire.

Think about your own life. Think about your own leadership. What example are you setting? What legacy are you leaving behind? I firmly believe that our leadership credibility rests on our ability to imitate Christ. Not that we will ever do this perfectly. Paul called himself the “chief of sinners” and so we are but as we tune our hearts to sing His praise. As we train our feet to walk the Jesus way. As we turn our lives away from sin and towards Christ, we will leave a great blessing in our wake that will echo throughout the generations.

Readings for tomorrow: Esther 1-3, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, Psalms 35:17-28, Proverbs 21:19-20

August 18, 2019
READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Esther 1-3, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, Psalms 35:17-28, Proverbs 21:19-20

Readings for TOMORROW: Esther 4-7, 1 Corinthians 12:1-26, Psalms 36, Proverbs 21:21-22

August 19, 2019
DIVINE REVERSALS

Readings for today: Esther 4-7, 1 Corinthians 12:1-26, Psalms 36, Proverbs 21:21-22

At a fundamental level, Esther is a story of divine reversals. God turning things on their heads in order to save His people. Mordechai is lifted up. Haman is brought low. Esther becomes Queen after Vashti is deposed. The Jewish people go from mourning to joy. From defeat to victory. From death to life almost overnight. Purim is inaugurated to commemorate the incredible miracle of God's deliverance and many Jews believe this is the one festival they will continue to celebrate even after Messiah comes.

It is impossible to imagine the emotions behind such a dramatic turn of events. One moment, you are cowering in your home in fear as the mob gathers to bring death and destruction. Local authorities are no help. In fact, they are leading the charge at the king's order. I think of my African-American friends who tell stories from their own family histories about the lynchings they witnessed during the Civil Rights struggle of the 20th century. I think of my South Sudanese friends who live in fear of violent retribution by their own government. I think of my Somali friends who are planting churches under the shadow of Islamic extremism. They know this fear well. It is a constant companion. I think of the women I've met who've suffered abuse, sexual or physical or otherwise. They often feel trapped and alone and afraid. I think of the children I've met who've been violently treated within their own family. I have seen the same fear in their eyes. It is crippling. It is paralyzing. It is dreadful.

But then a new edict is read! A new proclamation is issued! Freedom! Deliverance! Salvation! Think of the joy the Persian Jews, living in the midst of a hostile, pagan empire must have felt! They were not helpless! They were not alone! God had raised up a deliverer! A savior! A messiah! In the person of Esther. In the person of Mordechai. God was acting anew to protect His chosen people. Now think of the joy that accompanied the Emancipation Proclamation or the Civil Rights Act or the election of President Obama in our own time. Think of the joy that accompanied the permanent cease-fire agreement in South Sudan. (The terms of which were unfortunately violated almost immediately...) Think of the joy that comes when entire villages are saved by the gospel and delivered from the influence of Islamic extremism. Think of the joy that comes to a woman when she finally finds the courage to leave her abuser, seek healing and help, and start a new life. Or the joy that comes to children as they experienced love for the first time. These too are Purim.

And what about your life? What about the bondage you have faced or currently are facing? Is it addiction? Is it slavery to sin of some sort? Is it the darkness of depression? The painful affliction of a mental, emotional, or physical illness? Where do you need deliverance today? Where do you need a savior? In what corners of your heart do you still cower in fear? Afraid of what tomorrow may bring? Let Esther give you hope! Even at the 11th hour, God is still working to bring salvation!

Readings for tomorrow: Esther 8-10, 1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13, Psalms 37:1-11, Proverbs 21:23-24

August 20, 2019

LOVE

Readings for today: Esther 8-10, 1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13, Psalms 37:1-11, Proverbs 21:23-24

“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Corinthians 13:7)

Our world is so confused when it comes to love. Too many people have fallen for the lie that love is a feeling. Something you can fall in and out of. Something disposable. Something that comes and goes. We see it all the time when celebrities break up. When cultural influencers announce their separations on social media. They still “love” each other but their love is not strong enough to overcome their differences. Their love is not strong enough to overcome their infidelities. Their love is not strong enough to hold them together.

Too many people have fallen for the lie that they must “love” themselves first. To do anything else is to subject oneself to abuse or dysfunction. The idea of sacrificing oneself daily for another human being. Putting that person’s needs above one’s own is anathema in our culture. Love must be “self-serving.” Love must lead to “self-actualization.” Love must demand that others love us the way we love ourselves.

Too many people have fallen for the lie that “love” is the same as sexual attraction. Everything is hyper-sexualized in our culture and to deny our animal attractions is now considered harmful. We are warned it might lead to depression and suicide. If we fail to affirm the sexual attractions of other people - no matter how disordered - we are hateful and bigoted and phobic.

Love has become a false god in our culture. A brutal tyrant with an insatiable appetite. He demands complete obedience and blind loyalty. His corrupting influence is now being felt in our schools and communities. In our courts of law and state houses. Even many churches are bowing at his altar. The results are devastating.

The Bible is clear...God is love, love is not God. It’s a critical distinction. God is love. God demonstrates His great love in the sending of His Son. God shows us what love is by sacrificing Himself in our place. God’s love is completely selfless. It puts our needs above His own. It is solely focused on the good of the “other.” It is not self-serving. It is not possessive. It is not resentful. It is not prideful. It keeps no record of wrongs. It patiently endures all for the sake of all.

God’s love bears all things. Even you. Even me. All of us are sinners. We are enslaved to our desires. We do the things we don’t want to do and we don’t do the things we do want to do. We can’t help ourselves.

God’s love believes all things. I have people in my life that I dearly love. They tell me they no longer believe in God. My response is always the same. “God believes in you.” God’s love can do no different. He sees each one of us as we ought to be. As He created us to be. As He redeemed us to be. And He longs for us to turn and embrace Him.

God’s love hopes all things. God will never give up on you. God will never stop pursuing you. God is relentless in the chase. His love drives Him. His great desire is that all should be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth.

God’s love endures all things. All of us are at war with God on some level. We rebel against His will. We reject His way. Our hearts are corrupt and deceitful and full of pride. They are always pulling us to go our own way. Do our own thing. Take our destiny into our own hands. God’s love endures our fits and starts. Our fears and failures. Our mistakes and missteps.

God’s love never fails. It will never fail you. It will never fail me. It will never fail the world. God’s love is enough. It died on a cross to satisfy the demands of justice. It willingly and joyfully took our place. Endured the

punishment we deserved. Paid the price for our sin. God's love would not stop until the work was finished. Until every last sin was wiped away. This is the love of God, friends!

Do you know you are loved by the God of the universe? Do you walk in His love? Rest in His love? Are you confident in His love? We aren't talking about a feeling here. We are talking about an objective reality that is true whether we know it or not. Believe it or not. Understand it or not. Feel it or not. God's love is the deepest, most profound truth undergirding the entire universe. His love is the foundation of all creation. His love provides meaning and purpose to human life. It is the telos or goal of our existence. Embracing this love is what gives us peace. Peace with God. Peace with others. Peace with ourselves.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 1-3, 1 Corinthians 14:1-17, Psalms 37:12-29, Proverbs 21:25-26

August 21, 2019
WHY DO THE RIGHTEOUS SUFFER?

Readings for today: Job 1-3, 1 Corinthians 14:1-17, Psalms 37:12-29, Proverbs 21:25-26

In a very real sense, the Bible begins with the book of Job. Job was written chronologically before all the other books and it poses ancient, unanswerable questions. Why do the righteous suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? Where is God when it hurts? How can a good God allow evil to exist? These questions seem universal. They seem hardwired into our DNA. Human beings in every time and place and culture and condition have pondered these questions. Various answers have been given. Buddhists believe suffering is illusory. Enlightenment is reached when we detach from this world. Hindus believe suffering is part of the wheel of life. How we handle suffering in some sense determines if we transcend to a higher order of existence as that wheel turns. Atheists believe suffering is random, capricious, and meaningless since there is nothing transcendent about human life. Muslims and Jews believe suffering is a result of human sin. A condition which infects every person at the deepest, most fundamental level. The answer to suffering is to love God and obey His commands. Christians similarly believe in the depravity of the human condition but believe redemption is found at the cross where God Himself enters our suffering and lays down His life for us.

Job is a meditation on human suffering. It asks hard questions. Tackles difficult issues. Honestly and transparently grapples with the deepest truths. It is part of the “wisdom literature” of the Bible which shapes how we read it. It is not to be read as pure history, though there may have been an historical Job. It is not to be read literally, after all, how in the world could the author know what’s happening in the courts of heaven? It is to be read as ancient wisdom from a Spirit-inspired author who is seeking to understand why the righteous seem to suffer so much in our world.

What do we learn from these opening chapters? Job is a righteous man. In fact, he is the most righteous man who has ever lived. He is faithful. His heart is true. His worship is pure. His life is a model for us all. But there are forces that exist beyond Job’s control or understanding. There is evil in the world. Spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places that actively seek our harm. The world is not a friendly place for the righteous. It is not safe or secure. Bad things do happen. Horrible things. Terrible things. Job suffers them all. His children are murdered. His flocks and herds stolen. His wealth disappears overnight. His health is shattered. Disease and infection cover him from head to toe. Job is utterly and completely broken. At the same time – small comfort as it is - his life is still in God’s hands. There is a limit to what God will allow. Evil does not run rampant or unrestrained. As deep as our suffering gets, God’s faithfulness is deeper still. Job has hit rock bottom and still he clings to his faith. It is all he has left.

It’s a hard, painful read and it’s important not to jump to conclusions. My encouragement is to follow the example of Job’s friends. Come and sit with Job in the ashes of his life. Grieve with him. Comfort him. Listen to him. Listen to him cry out for justice. Listen to him cry out for mercy. Listen - as painful as it is - for him to cry out for death. Resist the urge to offer empty platitudes. Resist the urge to offer easy answers. Resist the urge to ease your own discomfort. Walking with someone through the valley of the shadow of death is never easy. Sitting with someone in the midst of their darkest depression and despair is heartbreaking. And yet we cannot rush the process. We must pray for the courage to walk the Via Dolorosa (The way of suffering) together. After all, is this not what Christ did for us?

Readings for tomorrow: Job 4-7, 1 Corinthians 14:18-40, Psalms 37:30-40, Proverbs 21:27

August 22, 2019
SPEAKING OUT OF TURN

Readings for today: Job 4-7, 1 Corinthians 14:18-40, Psalms 37:30-40, Proverbs 21:27

Job's friends were doing so well. Word gets out about all Job has suffered and they come running. They grieve with him. They weep with him. They sit with him in the dust and ashes of his tragic life. For seven days, they silently keep vigil. For seven days, their presence is a comfort. For seven days, they faithfully love and care for their dear friend. Then they open their mouths...

What is it about us that makes us so prone to rush to judgment? To refuse to hear someone out? To listen to their story in full? What is it about us that feels the need to jump in? Cut people off? Interrupt? I remember when my wife first met my family. One of the first things that struck her was how often we interrupted each other. Arguing was our love language. Three strong-willed brothers going at it all the time, pontificating on every subject imaginable. Most of it was hot air, of course. We were clueless. Ignorant. Foolish. Even when we were correct, it didn't matter, because our goal was to be right. To win the argument. To pump our own tires and make ourselves feel good.

I think about my brothers when I read the Book of Job. When I hear the arguments Job's friends make in response to Job's heartbreaking cries. They are more interested in correcting his theology than comforting his soul. They are more interested in defending God than demonstrating love. They feel compelled to justify Job's suffering as if getting to the root cause will ease his pain. I see it all the time. In the midst of great tragedy or crisis, so many people want to know why? Why did this happen? Why now? Why me? Why didn't God protect me or those I love? When I was young and foolish, I tried to answer these questions. I would sit with grieving families thinking my theological answers would bring them peace. Thankfully, I learned quickly from my mistakes. The better approach was simply to listen. To put my arms around them. To simply sit in the ashes and resist the temptation to offer explanations.

Regardless of what people say, the question they really are asking is where is God? Is He with me in the midst of my pain? Is He here with me at the bedside of the one I love? Is He in the room? Does He hear my cries? Does He weep with me? The central truth of Christianity is this...God is with us. Jesus is Emmanuel. We are never alone. God traveled the vast reaches of our universe to be with us. He left heaven and came to earth to become one of us. He entered human history. Became flesh and blood and moved into our neighborhood. All so that we would know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are loved.

Friends, you are blessed. You have access to a truth Job could only long for. You have Jesus. He is with you in your pain. He is with you in your heartache. He is with you in your grief. He is with you in suffering. He's not here to blame. He's not here to condemn. He's not here to put the burden on you or remind you of the consequences of your actions. He is here to hold you. He is here to comfort you. He is here to offer you grace.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 8-11, 1 Corinthians 15:1-28, Psalms 38, Proverbs 21:28-29

August 23, 2019
ABANDONED BY GOD

Readings for today: Job 8-11, 1 Corinthians 15:1-28, Psalms 38, Proverbs 21:28-29

“Behold, he passes by me, and I see him not; he moves on, but I do not perceive him.” (Job 9:11)

There is nothing worse than feeling abandoned by God. I know so many who have experienced this dark night of the soul or who are going through it even now. It is a lonely journey. One fraught with danger. Many lose their way. Many lose their faith. I have listened to their stories. Stories of abuse and trauma. Stories of struggle and heartache. Stories of existential longing and loss. It is probably the most heartbreaking part of the work I do. I often find myself in tears alongside them. I find myself praying desperately for them. I find myself wishing I could give them what their hearts long for. But I cannot. For I am not God.

Job is crying out to God. Crying out in the midst of his pain and suffering for God to answer. For God to deliver. For God to save. He is crying out for God’s presence. He longs to hear His voice. He wants to know God is with him but all he feels is God’s absence. Where is God when it hurts? Where is God when we struggle? Where is God when suffer pain and loss? These are some of the deepest, most profound questions of our existence. They seem hardwired into our souls. Even those who do not think much about God find themselves asking these questions when tragedy strikes.

Job is not the only one who’s experienced God’s absence. David too knows what it’s like. “I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart. O Lord, all my longing is before you; my sighing is not hidden from you...But I am like a deaf man; I do not hear, like a mute man who does not open his mouth...But for you, O Lord, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer...For I am ready to fall, and my pain is ever before me...Do not forsake me, O Lord! O my God, be not far from me! Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!” (Psalms 38:8-9, 13, 15, 17, 21-22) Sound familiar? Ever felt this way? Ever prayed this kind of prayer? All of us have on some level. Every Christian I know has experienced the absence of God at some point in their lives. They have felt abandoned by God. Left on their own. It’s deeply unsettling. Challenging on an ontological level. It forces us to come face to face with our deepest fears. And lest you think it’s tied to sin, consider God’s servant Job who was blameless and righteous in his generation. Consider God’s servant David who was a man after God’s own heart. Consider God’s servant Mother Theresa who experienced a profound absence of God over the last several decades of her own life.

Consider Jesus Christ Himself who cried out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” If we are going to faithfully follow Jesus, we should expect to go through this dark night of the soul. We should expect to travel through the valley of the shadow of death. We should expect God to wean us off our trust in “feelings” or “experiences” so we can learn to trust in Him alone. On the cross, Jesus felt the pain of His Father’s absence far more than the pain of the nails in his hands and feet. Over the course of her life, Mother Theresa felt the pain of God’s absence more than the pain of those she served in Calcutta. David. Job. All of them suffered terribly from existential loneliness. But God didn’t leave them there. God remained faithful. As they walked the dark and narrow and terrifying way, He was always at their side. Though they could not sense Him, He was beside them. Though they could not feel Him, He was there. Just as He redeemed His own Son’s life from the grave, so He redeemed Job’s life and David’s life and Mother Theresa’s life. And His promise is that one day He will redeem our lives as well. Trust Him. Trust Him more than your feelings. Trust Him more than your desires. Trust Him more than your experiences. Trust the One whose name is Faithful and True!

Readings for tomorrow: Job 12-15, 1 Corinthians 15:29-58, Psalms 39, Proverbs 21:30-31

August 24, 2019
ARGUING WITH GOD

Readings for today: Job 12-15, 1 Corinthians 15:29-58, Psalms 39, Proverbs 21:30-31

What is prayer? For some it is a rote exercise. We repeat the phrases we memorized as a young person over and over again before meals and before bed. For others, prayer is a “just break glass in case of emergency” exercise. We call on God only when we need him. Only as a last resort. For others, prayer is about creating intimacy with God. Spending time with him in the mornings or in the evenings. Sharing with him the emotions and struggles of the day. For others, it’s a list. Sins to be confessed. Needs to be met. Praises to offer. All these things are good and right and hopefully a regular part of your daily prayer time.

Job invites us to add yet another layer – argument. Now I know that sounds strange. After all, who can argue with God? What’s the point when “No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the Lord.” (Proverbs 21:30) Furthermore, it doesn’t feel good. It feels like we’re questioning God. Contending against God. Fighting God and how can that be holy? How can that be righteous? How can that be acceptable? What if God gets sick of it and decides to strike us down? What if God gets tired of us and turns his back? Argue with God? Get mad at God? Shake my fist at God? You have to be kidding me!

But then we read these words from King David in the Psalms... “My heart became hot within me. As I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue: “O Lord, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am! Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath!” (Psalms 39:3-5) It’s tempting to think of David singing these words in a sweet, sing-songy voice but that’s not what the text says. David is angry. His heart burns hot within him. He is enraged at all he is suffering and he lashes out at God. He raises his voice. He clenches his fist. And he demands God give him an answer.

Job reacts similarly to his own suffering. “Behold, I have prepared my case; I know that I shall be in the right. Who is there who will contend with me? For then I would be silent and die. Only grant me two things, then I will not hide myself from your face: withdraw your hand far from me, and let not dread of you terrify me. Then call, and I will answer; or let me speak, and you reply to me.” (Job 13:18-22) Job wants an audience before God. Job wants to try his case before His Creator. What he is experiencing is not fair. It is not just. It is not righteous. It doesn’t fit with who he knows God to be.

Job is angry with God. But in his anger he does not sin. In his anger he maintains his faith. In his anger he still trusts in God’s goodness and faithfulness and steadfast love. “Though he slay me, I will hope in him; yet I will argue my ways to his face. This will be my salvation, that the godless shall not come before him.” (Job 13:15-16) Job understands God can handle his anger. Job understands God can handle his frustration. Job understands God is like a loving Father who lets his child yell and scream and carry on and throw a fit and yet never stops loving him. Never stops reaching out for him. And once the child expends all their anger and pent-up frustration, the Father gathers him into his arms. Sits him on his lap. Whispers words of peace and hope and love and joy into his ears.

This too is prayer. Coming before God in total honesty. Raw. Real. Transparent. Laying before him all our brokenness, suffering, and pain. Sharing with God our deepest emotions. Our darkest fears. Our desperate needs. Letting God see us in all our weakness. Too often, we think we have to have it altogether when we pray to God but that is a lie. The Bible clearly invites us to come before God as we are and to engage him for who he is. This is the example Job sets for us.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 16-19, 1 Corinthians 16, Psalms 40, Proverbs 22:1

August 25, 2019
READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Job 16-19, 1 Corinthians 16, Psalms 40, Proverbs 22:1

Readings for TOMORROW: Job 20-22, 2 Corinthians 1:1-11, Psalms 40:11-17, Proverbs 22:2-4

August 26, 2019
THE COMFORT OF GOD

Readings for today: Job 20-22, 2 Corinthians 1:1-11, Psalms 40:11-17, Proverbs 22:2-4

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

One of the more powerful testimonies I’ve seen in a while was given recently by comedian and late night host, Stephen Colbert, in an interview with Anderson Cooper. (<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=p5bkP8H5NHM>) In the interview, they are discussion loss and grief and Stephen shares remarkably about his faith in Christ and how it carries him through. He speaks movingly about the empathy that develops when one experiences suffering or tragedy and the ability it gives us to connect with others who may be going through something similar. This is exactly what the Apostle Paul is getting at in the opening words of his second letter to his Corinthian friends. They are suffering and yet God is there to not only comfort them but also use them to comfort others with the same comfort they’ve been comforted with. This is such an important lesson! The comfort God brings to us in times of pain or loss or grief is never simply for us. It is also a gift given to us to give to others in His name. All of us are wounded healers of one sort or another. All of us can speak vulnerably and honestly and transparently about our experiences with pain. All of us can bring comfort to others if we are willing to share from our own deep places of heartbreak.

There is a famous play by Thornton Wilder called, “The Angel that Troubled the Waters.” In the play, he describes the scene at the pool of Bethesda where a multitude of hurting people gather to wait for that miraculous moment when the angel of God descends, stirs up the waters of the pool, and they become a source of healing. Anxious, crippled, broken people gather here day after day, hoping against hope that they will be the ones to receive the gift of healing. Among them is one particular man who never seems to make it. Others are always jumping the line in front of him to get to the pool first. On this particular day, he cries out in desperation to the angel to help him into the water so he can find healing but the angel instead whispers to him, “Stand back, this healing is not for you. Without your wound where would your power be? It is your very remorse that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men. Not the angels themselves can persuade the wretched blundering children of earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In love’s service, only wounded soldiers can serve.”

Why do the words of Job’s friends offer such small comfort? Because they do not come from the mouths of those wounded in love’s service. They do not come from men broken on the wheel of living. Yes, what they say often – thought not always - reflects God’s truth but the words are not offered in empathy or compassion. They are arguing with Job not comforting him. Thankfully, God never makes this mistake. In our deepest, darkest moments. When the future seems so bleak and the pain feels overwhelming. There God meets us. He wraps his arms around us. He doesn’t offer answers so much as he offers himself. He knows what it is to suffer so he can help those who are suffering. He knows what it is to feel alone and abandoned so he can help those who struggle with the same. In a very real sense, he himself has been “broken on the wheels of living.” He is the wounded soldier who serves the cause of love.

We all experience pain and suffering in this life. Some more than others. Some less than others. But all of us know its sting. We all experience grief and loss in this life. Some more than others. Some less than others. But all of us know what it’s like to lose someone we love. We all experience heartbreak and tragedy in this life. Some more than others. Some less than others. But all of us know what it feels like to have someone or something dear stolen from us. And by faith, these become gifts. Strange gifts to be sure but gifts nonetheless. Gifts we can share with others who may be going through the same thing. Friends, this is the beauty of the gospel. It is the story of a God who embraced suffering in order to bring comfort. Embraced pain in order to bring relief. Embraced death in order to bring life. And through Christ, all your pain and suffering and grief and heartbreak is redeemed. It becomes part of the beauty God is bringing out of the ashes of your life. It becomes a gift you get to share with those you love.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 23-27, 2 Corinthians 1:12-2:11, Psalms 41, Proverbs 22:5-6

August 27, 2019
FAITH VS. FEELINGS

Readings for today: Job 23-27, 2 Corinthians 1:12-2:11, Psalms 41, Proverbs 22:5-6

This past Sunday, my twin daughters stood before their church family and publicly proclaimed their faith in Jesus Christ. It was a beautiful moment. One of my proudest as a dad. As we prepared for this day, we talked a lot about why we believe and what we believe. We talked a lot about what it was they were professing to their brothers and sisters in Christ. Initially, both of them said the same thing. “We are doing this because we want to get closer to God.” Now I love the sentiment. I too long to experience a deep closeness with God. But our feelings and experiences cannot be the foundation of our faith. It must go deeper. Faith is not so much “subjective” as it is “objective.” It is a conscious decision to place our trust in Jesus who lived, died, and rose again on our behalf. It is His faithfulness that matters not our own. It is His completed work on the cross that saves not the emotional high we get at camp or in a worship service. It’s not that those emotional experiences aren’t special. Of course they are! I love it when God feels very close and my experiences of Him are deeply intimate.

But what happens when God feels distant? Absent? What if we can’t find God? Then what happens to our faith? In our reading today, Job describes what it feels like when God seems absent. “Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat!...Behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I do not perceive him; on the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him; he turns to the right hand, but I do not see him.” (Job 23:3, 8-9) He is crushed by the experience of feeling abandoned by God. He is feeling alone. Anxious. Afraid. And if his faith were based purely on his subjective experience of God, he would chuck the whole thing. Thankfully, however, Job knows God is God. He trusts God to be true to His character and nature and promises even when Job cannot see Him or find Him. “But God knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold. My foot has held fast to his steps; I have kept his way and have not turned aside...But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back? What he desires, that he does. For he will complete what he appoints for me, and many such things are in his mind.” (Job 23:10-11, 13-14)

He will complete what He appoints for me. What a promise! I know far too many people who, at some point in time in their life, raised their hand and prayed the sinners prayer. I know far too many people who publicly proclaimed their faith in Jesus and went down to the waters of baptism. I know far too many people who at one time believed but who now have abandoned their faith. Why? Because they placed their trust in their feelings. They placed their trust in their emotional experiences. Their faith was purely subjective and when the storms of this life began to blow and God seemed distant, their faith failed them. And they walked away.

Thankfully, God never walks away. Even when we are faithless, He is faithful! Even when we don’t feel His presence, He is there. Even when we cannot find Him or see Him, He is holding us in His arms. His promise is to never leave us nor forsake us. In fact, one of the many names for Jesus in the Scriptures is Emmanuel which means, “God with us.” Maybe you find yourself struggling this morning like Job. Maybe you feel like God is distant or absent from your life. Maybe you find yourself wrestling this morning like Jacob. Maybe you feel like God is punishing you or you are feeling the weight of His judgment. Maybe you find yourself confused this morning like Moses. You know God has placed a call on your life but you have no idea how it will come to pass. Maybe you find yourself angry this morning like David. You look around at all the evil and injustice in the world and you cannot imagine how God could ever let such things happen. These emotions are strong. These feelings are real. But rather than let them draw you away from God, let them lead you right back to the cross. Right back to the place where God Himself suffered and died. Right back to the place where God revealed Himself in all His tragic splendor all for love of His ruined creation. Let the objective reality of His death and resurrection renew your faith. Restore your belief. Re-establish your trust. No matter what we think or feel, God remains God. And He will bring to completion the good work He began in you!

Readings for tomorrow: Job 28-30, 2 Corinthians 2:12-17, Psalms 42, Proverbs 22:7

August 28, 2019
SEARCHING FOR WISDOM

Readings for today: Job 28-30, 2 Corinthians 2:12-17, Psalms 42, Proverbs 22:7

Human beings are amazing creatures. Capable of incredible things. We have split the atom. Probed the depths of our solar system. Studied life at a molecular level. We have delved deep into the earth. Sent our submarines into the ocean's depths to search out her mysteries. We have been to the top of the highest mountains. Nothing seems beyond our grasp. We have gained so much knowledge over the centuries. So much information. What we lack is wisdom.

In his bestseller, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval Harari catalogues the miraculous story of the human race. How did this one species come to dominate the earth? How were they able to accomplish so much in so little time? And where do we go from here? He's not optimistic. "Despite the astonishing things that humans are capable of doing, we remain unsure of our goals and we seem to be as discontented as ever. We have advanced from canoes to galleys to steamships to space shuttles – but nobody knows where we're going. We are more powerful than ever before, but have very little idea what to do with all that power. Worse still, humans seem to be more irresponsible than ever. Self-made gods with only the laws of physics to keep us company, we are accountable to no one. We are consequently wreaking havoc on our fellow animals and on the surrounding ecosystem, seeking little more than our own comfort and amusement, yet never finding satisfaction. Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who don't know what they want?" Dr. Harari is not a Christian. In fact, he is an atheist but even he can see the lack of wisdom in our world.

Job's diagnosis of the human condition isn't all that different from Harari. Job too catalogues the amazing things human beings are able to do. Mine the depths of the earth. Till the soil and bring forth food. Redirect the courses of streams and rivers. Even overturn mountains and build roads through the wilderness. "But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Man does not know its worth, and it is not found in the land of the living. The deep says, 'It is not in me,' and the sea says, 'It is not with me.' It cannot be bought for gold, and silver cannot be weighed as its price. It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir, in precious onyx or sapphire. Gold and glass cannot equal it, nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold. No mention shall be made of coral or of crystal; the price of wisdom is above pearls. The topaz of Ethiopia cannot equal it, nor can it be valued in pure gold. "From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living and concealed from the birds of the air. Abaddon and Death say, 'We have heard a rumor of it with our ears.' "God understands the way to it, and he knows its place." (Job 28:12-23)

Only God knows the way to wisdom. Humanity for all her astonishing ability simply cannot manufacture it on her own. It is a gift. It comes to us from God. It requires humility. Submission. Relinquishing our pride and bowing the knee before our Creator. "And God said to man, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.'" (Job 28:28) Our world suffers terribly from lack of wisdom. We spend our lives trying to solve the very problems we create. We reject God's wisdom when it comes to sexuality. The result is abortion, sexually transmitted disease, sexual abuse, the objectification of the human body, and broken relationships. We reject God's wisdom when it comes to wealth. The result is the rich get richer while the poor suffer. We reject God's wisdom when it comes to creation care. The result is a world on fire and a climate that is getting more extreme with each passing year. When will we learn? When will we finally surrender? When will we finally let go and let God have control over all of life?

Readings for tomorrow: Job 31-33, 2 Corinthians 3, Psalms 43, Proverbs 22:8-9

August 29, 2019
GLORY

Readings for today: Job 31-33, 2 Corinthians 3, Psalms 43, Proverbs 22:8-9

I remember sitting on top of Cadillac Mountain when I was in college. I was a counselor at a residential camp in Maine for the summer and had taken a group of boys camping in Acadia National Park. We got up while it was still dark and hiked under the stars until we reached the top of the mountain to see the sunrise. It was a gorgeous night. Very little light pollution so it felt like you could see the entire Milky Way. It was truly glorious. But then the sun began to peek over the horizon. It's rays reflected off the waters of the North Atlantic. It felt like we could see for thousands of miles. The stars were almost immediately forgotten. The beautiful night gave way to an even more glorious dawn. It was an experience I will never forget.

I think about that sunrise as I read these words from Paul this morning. "Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory." (2 Corinthians 3:7-11) Yes, the Law of God has its own particular glory. Handed down from on high on Mt. Sinai to Moses, it had served to guide the people of Israel for generations. It revealed God's will. It revealed God's nature and character. It revealed God's love. It revealed God's holiness. The Law of God taught the people of Israel not only how to live and relate to their Creator but it also taught them the depths of their depravity and sin. The Law was given not just to restrain evil but also to remind us of our desperate need for a Savior.

Thus, the glory revealed in Christ far surpassed the glory revealed in the Law. In Christ, the Law finds its fulfillment. In Christ, the Law finds its telos or goal. In Christ, the demands of the Law are satisfied. The curse of the Law is broken. And the glory of the Law gives way to even more glory. This is why Paul can say confidently, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:17-18) He understands we no longer live under the governance of the Law. It's guardianship is over. The need for a tutor ends when the Master arrives. Does this mean we are free to do whatever we please? Of course not. To submit ourselves to sin is to submit ourselves to a yoke of slavery! Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. Freedom to follow Christ. Freedom to obey Christ. Freedom to love Christ. It is the Spirit who pulls back the veil from our eyes. It is the Spirit who helps us see the glory of the Lord. It is the Spirit that renews and transforms us from one degree of glory to another. From the glory we received when we were conceived in the image of God to the glory we receive when we are "re-conceived" in the image of Christ. All of this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit and all of it is ours in Christ Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: Job 34-36, 2 Corinthians 4:1-12, Psalms 44:1-8, Proverbs 22:10-12

August 30, 2019
JARS OF CLAY

Readings for today: Job 34-36, 2 Corinthians 4:1-12, Psalms 44:1-8, Proverbs 22:10-12

I have this clay pot on my desk. A friend gave it to me years ago. She bought it in Egypt from a local vendor who literally spent his days forming these vessels out of clay and letting them back in the sun before taking them to market to sell. It is simple. Ordinary. Fairly fragile. I imagine if I used it day in and day out like most people over in that part of the world, it would become chipped and cracked. Eventually it break apart altogether.

I think about this pot every time I read Paul's words to the Corinthians. "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." (2 Corinthians 4:7) You and I are no different than the pot that sits on my desk. Simple. Ordinary. Fairly fragile. It doesn't take much to wound us. Hurt us. Chip us. Crack us. Break us. And yet God is His unsurpassed wisdom and grace has entrusted to us the treasure of the gospel. Through His Spirit He has deposited Christ into our hearts. And we now carry Him with us wherever we go.

There is a lot of pressure in our world to be perfect. To never let anyone see you sweat. To pretend like we have it altogether. On the flip side, there seems to be just as much pressure to be "real" and "authentic." To publicly curate our brokenness on social media in service of self-promotion. Both views are deeply misguided because they both focus on the pot rather than the Potter. They focus on the jar of clay rather than the treasure hidden within. They both flip the script and ascribe the power to the person rather than to God which is why all such efforts eventually fall apart.

We are weak and feeble. We are foolish and ignorant. We are anxious and afraid. Each one of our "jars" is chipped and cracked and broken in so many different ways. But when we see ourselves through the eyes of faith, we see past all the hurts, wounds, and scars to the treasure deposited within. We see the light of Christ shining through all our imperfections giving light and life and blessing to those around us. We understand that these "vessels" we inhabit are ultimately not what's most important. Rather it is Christ in us that is the hope of glory! So it doesn't matter what hardships we suffer or what injustice we face. We recognize this world has nothing for us. It is not our home. So we can spend our lives in service to Christ. We can wear these bodies out for the sake of Christ's mission in this world. We can exhaust our resources and our time and our energy. We can leave it all on the field so to speak, trusting there is a greater prize awaiting us in heaven. I love how Paul describes his own life, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you." (2 Corinthians 4:8-12)

Paul gets it. His whole life has prepared him for this moment. All his training. Upbringing. Wealth. Power. Privilege. All of it now is poured out like a drink offering before Christ. He must die so others may live. He must give away all He has for the sake of those who do not know Jesus Christ. He must surrender all his needs, wants, and desires for the sake of the mission of proclaiming Christ Jesus. He understands the true worth of the treasure he carries inside and he lets his life become a living testimony to the surpassing power of Christ.

This is how the gospel spreads from one generation to the next. From one region of the world to the next. Through ordinary men and women who come face to face with the pearl of great price and sell all they have as a response. Ordinary people like you and me who grasp the infinite worth of the treasure we hold and do all we can to give it away to others.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 37-39, 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:10, Psalms 44:9-26, Proverbs 22:13

August 31, 2019
GOD'S PERSPECTIVE

Readings for today: Job 37-39, 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:10, Psalms 44:9-26, Proverbs 22:13

So this is the moment we've all been waiting for...God finally showing up! God finally speaking. God finally defending His actions, explaining things, letting us in on what He's been thinking. Except that's not what happens. Instead, we are given these words in Job 38:2, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" I remember being frustrated the first time I read them. Even a bit angry with God. But over the years I have come to a deeper understanding of who God is and who I am before Him. Literally, I am nothing. I am a sinner. I live in a constant state of rebellion against God and His ways. I am corrupt. Evil. Conceived in iniquity as Psalm 51 so eloquently puts it. I am totally depraved. Even my best thoughts and actions on my best day are poisoned by pride and selfishness. That is who I am without Christ. That is my natural state of being. That is how I was born into this world. Furthermore, even now that I am in Christ. Redeemed. Beloved. Given a new heart and new spirit. I am still finite. I am still dust and ashes. I cannot fathom why the sun rises each morning or the flowers bud each spring much less probe the mysteries of God's purposes. They remain unsearchable for me. Unfathomable. Beyond my limited understanding.

This is how God answers Job. There is no reason for Job's suffering. Not that he can understand. Not in this moment. Not while he's suffering and in pain. Not while he's demanding in his pride an audience before God. Not while he's upset and angry. Job must be humbled. He must come to an understanding of who he is and who he's addressing. "Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further." (Job 40:4-5) This is what I love about Job. This is what makes Job righteous and blameless in God's sight. This is ultimately why God will affirm His servant Job and judge Job's friends. Job is repentant. Job is humble. Job is contrite. When God finally answers him out of the whirlwind, Job responds with reverence, fear, and awe. The only appropriate response when we come before the Lord. He gets on his knees. He bows his head. He closes his mouth. He covers his eyes. He is finished speaking. There are no more words to say. God is present. God is here.

God is God and we are not. That's the essence of the message of the Book of Job and it's a tough one to swallow. The reality is we all like to pretend we are gods. Masters of our own universe. Captains of our own destiny. We like to pretend that we are in control when in fact we are not. God is moving in ways we cannot see or understand. He is doing things above and beyond us. He is working all things for His glory in the world. He has His purposes. We are simply His instruments. Beloved? Yes. Cherished? Yes. Esteemed? Yes. But our relationship with God comes with responsibilities. Our adoption into God's family as His sons and daughters comes with a certain set of expectations. Though we are heirs to all things in Christ, we ourselves are not Christ. Though the Father has given us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, we are not to assume this makes us into gods ourselves. Humility and repentance are the key to a well-lived life before God and Job shows us the way.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 40-42, 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, Psalms 45, Proverbs 22:14