

BIBLE IN A YEAR

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

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STUDY AND COMMENTARY

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September 1, 2018
THE GOSPEL IN EZEKIEL

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 13-16

Time to take another deep breath and step back. If one can get past the graphic imagery of chapter 16, one will see a compelling picture of the gospel emerge. A gospel that is as much for Israel as it is for the church today. In this chapter, God retells their national story from His point of view. He reminds them of their humble beginnings. Reminds them of His lavish blessings. Reminds them of their great betrayal. Reminds them of His everlasting covenant. This is their story. This is our story. This is the gospel story.

Where does our relationship with God begin? Not with us. We did not choose to love God. We could not choose to love God. No, we were helpless. Abandoned. Left all alone. Stillborn spiritually. It was not our beauty that caught God's eye but our desperation. "And as for your birth, on the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things to you out of compassion for you, but you were cast out on the open field, for you were abhorred, on the day that you were born. "And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' (Ezekiel 16:4-6) Out of pure compassion and grace, God adopted us as His own. Brought us into His family. Took us from the field where we had been cast. Bathed us. Fed us. Clothed us. Rocked us. Sang to us. Raised us. "I made you flourish like a plant of the field. And you grew up and became tall and arrived at full adornment. Your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare." (Ezekiel 16:7)

What does our relationship with God look like as it matures? We grew up under His watchful eye and gracious care. When the time was right, God took us as His bride. He covered our nakedness with the corner of His garment. He made His vow and covenant with us. (Remember the ceremony from Genesis with Abraham?) He bestowed riches and honor and glory on us as befits the bride of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And the whole world marveled at what God had done. The whole world came to see the splendor and glory of Israel. The whole world envied the relationship she had with her God.

But Israel grew proud. She began to believe her own hype. She read her own press clippings. She trusted in her riches and beauty and power and influence. She abandoned her covenant with the Lord and began to serve other gods. God's bride now playing the whore. She literally took the gifts God had given her and gave them away to idols. Fed them with the bread God provided from His own hands. Things got so bad that Israel began sacrificing their innocent children to appease these other bloodthirsty gods. "How sick is your heart, declares the Lord God, because you did all these things, the deeds of a brazen prostitute..." (Ezekiel 16:30)

Therefore God brought judgment on His bride. "For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God..." (1 Peter 4:17) God will not spare His bride. In fact, He holds His bride to an even higher standard. Higher than Samaria. Higher than Sodom. "Bear your disgrace, you also, for you have intervened on behalf of your sisters. Because of your sins in which you acted more abominably than they, they are more in the right than you. So be ashamed, you also, and bear your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous." (Ezekiel 16:52) God disciplines those He loves out of a desire to see them cleansed from sin and brought to glory. "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son or daughter whom he receives." (Hebrews 12:5-6) His desire is for His bride to return. To come back to Him. To be faithful and true once more. To remember from whence she came and to honor her Husband for all He has done. Why? So the world may again marvel at the intimacy of their relationship. So the world may again say, "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?" (Deuteronomy 4:7)

This is why Ezekiel 16 ends with this note of hope. "Yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant...I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the Lord, that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I atone for you for all that you have done, declares the Lord God." (Ezekiel 16:60, 62-63) God has atoned for His bride. On the cross, He paid for all her sin. He took all her punishment. All her shame. All her self-inflicted degradation on Himself. On the cross, the faithful Husband gave His life for the sake of His bride "so that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." (Ephesians 5:27)

September 3, 2018
IS GOD NOT JUST?

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 17-20

Today's reading poses a very important question. One we all ask. One that seems almost hardwired into our souls. Is God just? God's people have been asking this question for centuries. They look at their history. They look at their circumstances. They ponder their suffering and struggle and strife. And because of the difficulties they face in their lives, they wonder how God could allow such things to happen. They wonder how a good God could allow evil to flourish. They wonder how a loving God could stand by and watch His people endure such pain. They wonder how a gracious God could be so demanding.

I hear these questions all the time. "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.'" (Ezekiel 18:25) From the very beginning, we've been avoiding the responsibilities that come with being made in God's image and being given a mandate to care for all creation. We keep trying to find someone to blame for all our problems. Rather than looking at ourselves and the depth of human depravity, we look to God and look to blame-shift. We try to escape the natural consequences of our selfish behavior by pretending that somehow the issue is God's..."He made me this way", "He set up the world like this", "He is the one who allows evil to flourish..." All the while, we refuse to face the truth about the man or woman we see in the mirror.

God will have none of it. "Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it; for the injustice that he has done he shall die. Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life. Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?" (Ezekiel 18:25-29) God makes it very clear that He will not allow us to skirt our responsibilities. Our sin is the root of the evil we see in the world. Our rebellion is the reason for our difficult circumstances. Our refusal to follow the ways of God is why we face such suffering and hardship with so little hope. It is not God's arm that is shortened or God's strength that has failed or God's justice that has let them down. The failure is their own. Thankfully, God is merciful. He is gracious. He loves us despite our sin. Listen to His precious words from Ezekiel 18 and be encouraged. "Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die." Your soul is God's. Whether you believe or disbelieve. Whether you are good or evil. Whether you feel worthy or unworthy. Your soul is God's. He holds you in His hand. "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." You are only responsible for you. You are not responsible for the sins of your parents or friends or extended family. You are not at the mercy of your family's dysfunction or broken history. You are not simply the product of your genetic makeup. If you are a Christian, you are a rational, spiritual creature who is endowed by Christ with His Spirit to make godly choices. "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" God doesn't delight in your pain. God is not immune to your suffering. God does not derive a sadistic pleasure from the death of anyone, including the wicked. He loves everyone He made in His image and desires all to be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live." What God desires is NOT perfection but repentance. Humility rather than pride. A broken and contrite heart, God will never despise.

Friends, the secret to a life lived well before God has EVERYTHING to do with submission. Surrender. An honest, transparent acknowledgment of your sin. We come to the Cross on our knees. The ground is level. All are equally guilty in His sight and yet all are equally made righteous by the death of His Son. Nothing about you is left untouched. Unhealed. Unchanged. God will save to the uttermost those who turn to Him.

September 4, 2018
INSIDE THE STORY

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 21-24

One of the biggest challenges we have to overcome...especially when we read the Old Testament...is our tendency to see ourselves as neutral, third-party observers. We read the words and then decide if we believe them to be true or not. We think of ourselves as dispassionate, rational, and objective. We stand outside the biblical story. We take the parts we like and we jettison the parts we don't like. We believe we have options. We believe we get to determine what's true for us. And we cling on to those passages that help us understand how we are to be saved. It's a highly individualistic, highly rationalistic, thoroughly Western, uniquely Protestant approach to engaging the Bible. And it would have been utterly foreign to the biblical writers themselves.

Ezekiel sees himself as part of one long continuous story that harkens all the way back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He sees himself playing a very minor role in the grand sweep of God's epic tale of deliverance and salvation. He understood himself to be caught up in this story. His life as one thread in a much larger tapestry. His job as a Jewish man, much less a prophet of God, was to find his place in this story. To play his part. To do the work his God had called him to do. So as he surveys the landscape of what's happening around him. As he looks to the heavens and charts the courses of the stars or ponders the rise and fall of the great empires around the Ancient Near East or considers the desperate straights of his own people; he interprets all of these things from a theological perspective. He tries to discern God's hand in all that's taking place. Tragically, this includes the death of his own wife.

"Son of man, behold, I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke; yet you shall not mourn or weep, nor shall your tears run down." (Ezekiel 24:16) I cannot imagine the pain Ezekiel must feel at the loss of his beloved. We do not know much about their relationship but the fact that God Himself calls her the "delight" of Ezekiel's eyes probably says much. Their love must have been strong. Their intimacy deep. And yet when she passes, Ezekiel is not allowed to mourn. This may strike us as a little weird but for Ezekiel's contemporaries it would have been shocking. Jewish culture is highly expressive when it comes to grief. People in those days would literally hire professional mourners to weep and wail alongside those who had lost loved ones so they wouldn't feel ashamed to express their pain and heartbreak. Funerals would last for days and involve the whole community. Food would be eaten. Stories shared. Tears cried. It was a powerful, visceral ritual designed to help those who had lost loved ones process their grief. But Ezekiel is denied this experience. Why?

Why would God treat his prophet in this way? How could Ezekiel see God's hand in all this? What in the world made Ezekiel think that God was calling him NOT to grieve! NOT to mourn! NOT to weep? Again, it comes back to how Ezekiel understood himself. He lives within a much larger story that is unfolding over the centuries. God making Himself known to His people. God walking alongside His people. God relating to His people. Ezekiel understands all of life to be lived under the sovereign Lordship of Yahweh. Not just in the abstract but in the everyday. Ezekiel believed God was at work in every moment of his life. Every experience. Every success. Every failure. Every joy. Every pain. God ruled over it all and God was using it all for His purposes. So when his wife dies, Ezekiel somehow understands this to be yet another sign from God to His people. Ezekiel's own life. Ezekiel's own heartbreak will be used to demonstrate the depth of God's heartbreak and grief over the sins of His people. "Thus shall Ezekiel be to you a sign; according to all that he has done you shall do. When this comes, then you will know that I am the Lord God." (Ezekiel 24:24)

I know this sounds very strange to our ears and yet it is the key to understanding the Bible. It is the key to understanding why the people in the Bible did the things they did. It is the key to understanding why Noah built an ark. Sarah's laughter. Abraham going up a mountain to sacrifice his son. Moses confronting Pharaoh. Joshua

renewing the covenant. Deborah's song. Samuel hearing God's voice. David dancing before the ark. The religious reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah. The tears of Jeremiah. All of these great men and women believed their lives were not their own. They believed they were instruments in God's hands to use as He saw fit for His own purposes and glory. They had no identity outside of God. No independent existence apart from Him. They had no story to call their own. No, their lives were completely wrapped up in the much larger story God was telling about deliverance and salvation and redemption and final restoration! That's why Ezekiel could look at the death of his wife through a theological lens, even seeing it as yet another prophetic sign for God's people.

Imagine how your perspective on life would change if you saw the world through Ezekiel's eyes! Imagine seeing God's hand at work in every instance. Every encounter. Every experience good or bad. Imagine seeing God's purpose behind every success or failure. Every joy or sorrow. Every moment of every day. Imagine it was God speaking to you through every conversation. God teaching you and humbling you through every trial and hardship. Imagine God showing you His faithfulness as He gives you far more than you can handle. This, friends, is one of the deep and most profound messages running from Genesis to Revelation. God attempting to give us His eternal perspective. God trying to help see things from His point of view. From the vantage point of God's eternal kingdom, everything changes. The rise and fall of nations. The 24 news cycle. The triumphs and tragedies of life. The ordinary and mundane. All of it transformed. Impregnated with eternal significance -or insignificance as it were – in God's hands.

If only Ezekiel were alive today! I think he'd say, "Don't weep for me. Weep for the world. Weep for the lack of faith. The pervasiveness of sin. The rise of evil. The brokenness of God's people. Save your tears for the coming judgment of God."

September 5, 2018
CELEBRATING ANOTHER'S FALL

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 25-28

Yesterday I sat at a local yogurt shop with several middle school boys. It was our first small group of the year. The lesson happened to be on Genesis 1:27 where God describes how He made human beings in His image. Male and female. Black and white. Rich and poor. All bear the signature stamp of their Creator. We talked through the implications of this passage for each of them as they start school. Already their peer groups have formed. Already they know who's popular and who's not. Already they know who the jocks are and the nerds. The kids who struggle and the kids who succeed. The kids who have tons of friends and the kids who are lonely. We then flipped over to Galatians 3:26-28 where the Apostle Paul challenges us to move beyond our social categories and divisions and embrace one another in Christ. After the conversation, we discussed how we can put this into practice. Each boy gave us the name of a fellow student they know who they struggle with. Someone who is hard for them to love. Someone they may have made fun of or bullied even in the past. Their accountability point for the week is to approach that student and find a way to love them concretely in the name of Jesus. Sit with them at lunch. Hang out with them at recess. Confess their sin to them and ask for forgiveness if they've treated them poorly.

As Christians, we do not celebrate the struggles of others. We do not rejoice at their fall. We do not take secret pleasure in their pain. Ezekiel makes it clear that people who do such things will be judged. Either as individuals or as nations. The nations surrounding Israel watched them struggle and eventually fall into ruin. They rejoiced when it happened. Threw parties. Danced in the streets. They even took the opportunity to pile on for their own revenge. Ammon. Moab. Seir. Edom. Philistia. Tyre. All of them are guilty. All of them are judged. Perhaps Tyre most harshly. God even compares her king to Satan. "You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle; and crafted in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created they were prepared. You were an anointed guardian cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till unrighteousness was found in you. In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence in your midst, and you sinned; so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, and I destroyed you, O guardian cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire. Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor. I cast you to the ground..." (Ezekiel 28:12-17)

The reality is when we rejoice in wrongdoing. When we celebrate the fall of others. When we take pleasure in another person's pain and heartbreak, we are operating under the influence of the evil one. He loves watching God's people tear each other apart. He loves creating divisions and factions. He loves to isolate and attack and devour and destroy. As Christians, we must resist this temptation. We must resist the temptation to label others as our enemies. We must resist the temptation to make fun of others at their expense. We must resist the temptation to wound and hurt and pile on when someone's down. Instead, we must lift them up. We must encourage. We must stand at their side. Show compassion. Grieve with them and for them. Our hearts must break with their hearts. This is what it means to be Christ to others. To show Christ to others. To love Christ as He has loved us.

September 6, 2018
PRIDE: THE DEADLIEST OF SINS

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 29-32

One of the besetting sins of humanity is our pride. Like Adam, we truly want to become our own gods. Human history is replete with example after example of what happens when a person or tribe or nation achieves a certain measure of power, wealth, and privilege. They become proud. Arrogant. They forget God. They ignore God. They replace God. The most megalomaniacal even believe they've become God. Pharaoh is simply one of the many examples we could cite just from the Bible much less other ancient/modern sources.

Interestingly enough, those who would be gods almost always fall into the same pattern. They almost always make the same mistake. In an effort to prove their "godliness", they build monuments to themselves. Monuments to their own glory. Monuments that stretch as high as possible, reaching up towards the heavens. Think of the Tower of Babel. Think of the obelisks and images and pyramids of Pharaoh. Think of the temples and palaces and structures archaeologists have discovered all over the world in almost every great culture. Now think of our own time. Think of our own country. Think of how those who would be god build monuments to themselves through social media. Marketing. Advertising. The goal is to have the #1 hit single. The #1 bestseller. The largest, multi-national corporation. The most political influence and clout. They use their resources to self-promote, all in an effort to make their own name great. Pastors and churches are not immune. The goal for many is to draw the largest crowds. Raise the most funds. Build the biggest buildings on sprawling campuses across the country.

Do we not realize the risk we are running here? We who would be great should take heed from the warnings God has given through the prophet Ezekiel. "All this is in order that no trees by the waters may grow to towering height or set their tops among the clouds, and that no trees that drink water may reach up to them in height. For they are all given over to death, to the world below, among the children of man, with those who go down to the pit...Whom are you thus like in glory and in greatness among the trees of Eden? You shall be brought down with the trees of Eden to the world below. You shall lie among the uncircumcised, with those who are slain by the sword." (Ezekiel 31:14, 18)

A couple of years ago, during a time of prayer, the Lord spoke to my heart. You see, I am as ambitious as the next person. I am as prideful as any. My heart longs for success and recognition. I too would love to see my name in lights. So the Lord confronted me. And He gave me three words to guide the rest of my life.

Obscurity: God has commanded me to labor in obscurity. To be content with where He has me. To never seek another position. Never seek another raise. Never seek another opportunity. To simply walk with open hands before Him.

Anonymity: God has commanded me to embrace anonymity. To never self-promote. Never seek to make my name great. Never seek out recognition or pride of place. To let others take the credit and in fact, spend my life and influence promoting others above myself.

Insignificance: God has commanded me to acknowledge my insignificance. In the grand sweep of God's eternal plan, my contributions are very small. I am not an essential cog in this machine. I am not irreplaceable. I simply am one servant among billions who is being called to play his very minor role in God's Kingdom.

Does all this mean success is evil? Does all this mean wealth and power and privilege are to be resisted? Does all this mean we should never aspire to anything? Never work hard? Never try our best? Anyone who knows me, knows that cannot be true. The key is our motivation. True humility is not thinking more of oneself than one ought or less of oneself than one ought. Rather it is thinking of oneself less. Again, it means walking with open hands before the Lord. Letting Him fill them up with His plans for your life.

As I've learned to walk with an open heart before the Lord, it's been amazing to see where He's taken me. Humbling to see what He's entrusted me with. Leadership in an incredible church. A certain degree of influence in my denomination. An adjunct faculty position at Denver Seminary. Opportunities to teach overseas and help lead a revival in the Horn of Africa. He's taught me how to be a better husband and father. A better friend and neighbor. All of this came to me from God's own hands. I did not seek it out nor was I remotely qualified on paper for most of these positions. God simply moved me like a pawn on His great chessboard as He works out His will for the world. And I am happy and content to play my part.

What about you? Do you find yourself aspiring to greatness? Seeking to achieve all you can? Accumulate all you can? Earn the recognition of your peers? What drives you? What feeds your ambition? Is it the Lord or is it your pride? Heed the words of Ezekiel. Take care lest you follow in the footsteps of Pharaoh. Humble yourself before the Lord and let Him guide your steps.

September 7, 2018
GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 33-36

Today's reading brings with it a cascade of images. Watchmen. Shepherds. Scattered sheep. New covenants. Ancient prophecies. Culminating in one of the most beautiful promises in the Old Testament...the gift of God's Spirit. Is there a thread that ties this all together? Or does God simply have too many tabs open in His browser? Is there a common tie or theme or guiding principle at work here? Or is God doing His best "Jackson Pollock" impersonation? Sometimes when we read the Old Testament, especially in the prophetic literature, it can feel scattershot. Like a bunch of random events some scribe collated at a later date, none necessarily having to do with any other.

Today, however, is different. There is a thread that weaves itself throughout these chapters. Building towards a beautiful crescendo where God Himself promises to invade time and space to perform heart transplant surgery on His people. It all starts with this idea of the "watchman." Watchmen were essential in the ancient world. They stood guard on the walls of the village. Day and night they faithfully manned their posts. Never resting. Never sleeping. They bore a great responsibility. The safety of their people rested on their shoulders. Should an enemy invade, it was the watchman who would give warning. Should natural disaster strike, it was the watchman who often saw it coming. When the watchman gave warning, it was up to the people to respond. To take action. God tells Ezekiel he is to act as a watchman for Israel. To sound the warning when he sees them falling into sin. To point out where they are wandering off the path of righteousness. To challenge them to turn from their sin and return to God. If Ezekiel is faithful, he will potentially save his people. If he is faithless and refuses to speak up, he will have failed his people and their blood will be on his hands.

Why such a drastic call to action? Because the shepherds God has placed over His people are corrupt. Instead of caring for the sheep, they actually feed off them. Instead of protecting the sheep, they let them wander all over the place. Instead of seeking those that are lost, they abandon them to their fate. These faithless shepherds are only concerned with themselves. They've grown fat and lazy. They use the sheep to further their own purposes. Their own agenda. To enrich themselves and make their names great.

God looks down on His people. They are scattered and suffering. Lonely and afraid. Lost and wandering. Wounded and weak. Injured and hurting. And this pierces God's heart. So He takes action. "For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out...I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness...I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land...I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land...I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice." (Ezekiel 34:11-16) It's an unbelievable promise. God renewing His gracious and glorious covenant with Israel!

Why would God do such a thing? For the sake of His great name. "Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes." Remember, God's primary concern from creation to redemption to final glorification is His own glory. His own honor. His own reputation. God will make His name famous on the earth. God will make Himself

known among the nations. God's name will be lifted up! God will be worshiped in the way He deserves and the way He demands! One day, every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth! And what's happening here in Ezekiel is just a foretaste of what's to come.

So how will God make this happen? How will He take a stubborn and rebellious and sinful people and turn them into worshipers? Listen to what God Himself says He will do, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God." (Ezekiel 36:22-28) Isn't this amazing? God is not content to sit up in heaven and wait for us to get it right. He isn't going to sit back and watch as we work our tails off to get to Him. He isn't going to stand by as we struggle and suffer and fight the forces of darkness that attack us on every side. No. He WILL rescue! He WILL redeem! He WILL save! He lifts us up. Holds us in His arms. Bathes us in His grace. Transplants our broken hearts. Infuses us with His very Spirit. Gives us new desires. New appetites. New loves. And so we find ourselves walking in God's ways. Obeying His rules. Living by His commands. Not because we have to but because we want to! Not because we're forced to but because we long to show our devotion to our Heavenly Father! Not out of fear or anxiety of what might happen if we make a mistake but from a deep sense of peace and security that flows from our confidence in the unconditional love of God.

This, friends, is God's plan. From eternity. Before the heavens and the earth were made, God predestined us in love to enjoy the riches of His grace!

September 8, 2018

DRY BONES

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 37-40

Ezekiel 37 and the valley of dry bones is one of my favorite passages in all the Bible. I love how God uses Ezekiel to literally raise the dead to new life. In a sense, every time I get up to preach this is my prayer. That God would awaken hearts that have become dry. Stale. Still. Dead. And bring new life through the preaching of His Word and the movement of His Spirit.

Of course, the power to raise the dead to new life doesn't come from me. And this is of great comfort! Ezekiel was simply called to prophesy. To speak the words God gave him. This was his act of faith. To declare the goodness and glory of God to a valley full of scattered bones. We never know what season we will be born into. Some are born into seasons of revival where the church is vibrant and growing and seeking the Lord with all its heart. Some are born into seasons where the church is dying and struggling and enslaved to fear and sin. Ezekiel was called to be a prophet in exile. At a time in Israel's life where it seemed all hope had been lost. Their beautiful city had been destroyed. Their Temple raised to the ground. Their land conquered and occupied by foreign invaders. All the promises of God seemed to have come to an end. But in the midst of this national catastrophe, God brings a word of hope through His prophet. Ezekiel prophesies to the dry bones of Israel and a great "rattling" is heard. The scattered bones come together. Muscles and tissue and sinews form. The bodies rise. A great multitude as far as the eye could see. So Ezekiel prophesies again and the Spirit of God begins to blow. The dead bodies come alive! And why does God perform such a miracle? What is His primary aim and goal? Listen to what He tells Ezekiel. "And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord." (Ezekiel 37:13-14)

Now consider our own spiritual condition. The church in Europe and America is dying. For too long, it has tolerated sin. Think of the scandals rocking the Roman Catholic Church or the number of influential Protestant pastors whose moral failings have been exposed. Think of the number of churches who have lost sight of their mission in their arguments over styles of church music or the color of the carpet in the sanctuary. Think of the number of churches who have exchanged the truth of the gospel for the lies of our culture. Think of the number of churches who are closing their doors every day in communities across our country. It is heartbreaking. It can seem hopeless. I close my eyes and it's almost like I can picture the valley filling up with the bones of these formerly great congregations.

Now let's make it personal. As a pastor, I meet so many Christians who are struggling. Suffering. Dying spiritually. Their connection to God is tenuous at best. They've made choices and those choices have taken them far from God. They no longer spend time in His Word. No longer spend time with Him in prayer. No longer gather to worship with His people. Their everyday lives are filled with sinful pursuits they don't even recognize because they do not give God a second thought. Their hearts are not broken by the things that break God's heart. Instead, they spend their lives chasing their own happiness. Fulfilling their own wants and desires. They jump from church to church, never really putting down roots. Never really building authentic community because to do so would require them to die to themselves. It would require them to forgive past hurts. Look past the sins of others. Endure the heartache and pain that is part and parcel of the journey of building deep friendships. The end result of all this is spiritual death. This way of life ends in a valley of dry bones. But thankfully, even there, there is hope! For God can meet us in our valleys just as surely as He met Ezekiel! God can raise us to new life in these valleys just as surely as He did the people of Israel! With God, hope is never completely lost!

So where does life find you this morning? Are you traveling towards a valley filled with dry bones? Can you feel your spiritual life growing stale and your heart towards God growing cold? Examine your life! Take stock! What sin are you holding onto that is dragging you down? Has God given you new life? Raised you up yet again? Breathed His Spirit into your soul? Awesome! Now who do you need to tell? Over whose life do you need to "prophesy" so that they too might live?

September 10, 2018
THE LORD'S RETURN

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 41-44

It's hard to imagine how Ezekiel must have felt when he saw the Lord returning to the Temple. The only thing close to it might be watching the memorial being built after the Towers fell in New York City. To visit Ground Zero or to see the lights shining on a clear night reminds all of us to never forget what happened on that terrible day. I still remember sitting in my car, waiting to make a left turn onto Alexander Road from Canal Pointe Blvd, as I headed into Princeton for school that morning. Classes were canceled. Work was suspended. We all watched in horror as the events unfolded. My wife Kristi remembers being at school when the news came down and scrambling to figure out if any of the parents of her kids had been trapped in the towers as they fell. One of my good friends was mobilized as a National Guardsman and spent the next year serving as a chaplain at the site where they took the remains of those who had been killed so they could be identified. The experience was so traumatic for him that he ended up in therapy himself for almost a year. Another friend of mine was serving as the senior pastor of 5th Avenue Presbyterian Church at the time and when the towers fell, he donned his clerical robe, threw open the doors of his sanctuary, and ran out into the streets to usher people into safety. Living in such close proximity to New York meant we knew people personally who experienced the loss of loved ones. Lisa Beamer, whose husband Todd lost his life heroically in the charge to retake Flight 93, went to church literally a few miles away. As terrible as that day was for so many, it is equally if not more powerful to watch our nation memorialize those who fell. Millions visit the memorial and museum each year to pay their respects. It is a powerful witness and testimony to the resilient heart of the American people.

Now multiply 9/11 many times over. Imagine not only the Towers going down but planes flying into the Capitol building in Washington DC or the White House. Imagine tanks rolling down the highways of our country. Imagine bombs being dropped on every major city. Imagine armies burning and destroying everything in their path. Imagine America in ruins. Imagine living in exile in some foreign nation for decades, wondering if you will ever return home. Now imagine a prophet coming to you and laying out the exact dimensions of a new Capitol being built. A new White House. A new Supreme Court building. Imagine that prophet rolling out the blueprints of every national monument and showing them to you. Imagine him telling you a time is coming soon when you will return and America will be reborn. Can you imagine your excitement and joy? The feeling of national pride that would swell in your heart?

"Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east. And the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory. And the vision I saw was just like the vision that I had seen when he came to destroy the city, and just like the vision that I had seen by the Chebar canal. And I fell on my face. As the glory of the Lord entered the temple by the gate facing east, the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the Lord filled the temple." (Ezekiel 43:1-5) It is impossible to overstate the joy Ezekiel must have felt as he sees this vision the of the Lord's return. As painful as it was for him to see the Lord leaving the Temple in his earlier visions, it is now equally exciting to witness the Lord's return. God had not forgotten His people! God had not abandoned His promises! God would prove faithful! No wonder he fell on his face!

Life is often hard. There are moments, even seasons, where we feel like everything has come crashing down around us. We lose our job. Our cars are repossessed. Homes go into foreclosure. Relationships break down in divorce. We experience the sudden, tragic loss of someone we love. There is so much in this world that brings us pain and heartbreak. It can even feel at times like the Lord has abandoned us. Ridden off on his chariot somewhere far away, never to return. Don't believe the lie! God is faithful! He is true! He is steadfast in His love! He will never forsake or abandon you! He is with you! His glory is your sanctuary and your rearguard! If you walk by faith. If you trust in Him. If you surrender to His will and His ways. He will provide for you. He will restore the years the locusts have eaten. He will rebuild the ruins of your life. He will bring forth new growth and new life from the barren ground. This is His promise and He will never fail!

September 11, 2018

MEMORIAL

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 45-48

Today we remember. We remember firefighters racing into burning buildings. We remember first responders dragging people to safety. We remember police officers laying down their lives to protect the innocent. We remember ordinary people committing extraordinary acts of courage and bravery to guard against the loss of even more life. Most of all, we remember the almost 3,000 people who were killed in one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in history. Lives were forever altered on that day. Almost twenty years later, the pain still remains fresh for those who lost loved ones.

If you go to the 9/11 memorial today, you will see a memorial pool. Specifically designed by an architect who watched the second plane hit the South Tower from a rooftop on the Lower East Side, he found comfort in the days that followed by the waters of the Hudson River. He also found inspiration. Rejecting any notion of rebuilding on the smoldering ruins, he imagined a scene where a deep void was continually being filled by water. A powerful representation of grief and loss, the memorial pool is a perfect reflection of his vision. As each individual stream flows over the edge of the pool, they join together at the bottom to become one. Constantly emptying. Constantly refilling. Those who visit sense healing in those waters. Hope in those waters. Even while acknowledging the reality of the void.

Ezekiel sees a similar vision. Water flowing from the Temple of God. It begins as a trickle but soon becomes a mighty river, flowing southeast out of Jerusalem towards the Dead Sea. The region around the Sea is a wasteland. A desert. A void. A place where nothing grows. And yet, as the river reaches the sea, this amazing miracle takes place! Trees begin to grow on either side. Their fruit providing food and sustenance to all. Their leaves never wither or fade. The water itself teems with life. Fish of every kind find a home there. As the waters reach the Sea, they bring it from death to life. The saltwater turns fresh and it begins to produce a hundredfold. Yes, there are still reminders of the former days. Still reminders of the death that once reigned here. The marshes and swamps retain their salty character but those simply serve as witnesses to the miracle of resurrection that has taken place!

For the Christian, we recognize the prophetic nature of Ezekiel's vision. Many centuries later, the Apostle Peter will actually stand on the steps of the Temple and preach the gospel for the first time. The Holy Spirit moved powerfully through his words and 3000 gave their lives to Jesus Christ. Along the very stairs where Peter most likely preached are the ceremonial mikvehs where Jewish believers would wash before going into worship. The 3000 who were saved were probably baptized in those very waters! What began as a trickle soon became a mighty river as the Spirit moved in the hearts of those early believers. From 20,000 at the end of the 1st century to over 20 million some two hundred years later to over 3 billion today; the gospel of Jesus Christ just gets deeper and wider as it flows!

God is still on the move, friends! Even after all these centuries, lives are still being changed by the gospel! It moves out into the wasteland of our world. Into the darkest places where death reigns. And it brings life. Hope. Joy. Peace. Churches sprout up along its banks, bearing the fruit of the Spirit to sustain the nations. As they seek Christ themselves, they find their leaves never wither. The world itself is renewed. Restored. Redeemed. Where O Death is now thy sting? Where O Death is now thy victory? The Living Water that Christ offers us fills the void! It becomes a spring of water welling up continually in our souls. Healing our hurts. Easing our pain. Comforting our grief. Sustaining us until the day when Christ will come again to wipe away every tear and make all things new.

September 13, 2018
SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Readings for the day: Daniel 1-6

"In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect..." (1 Peter 3:15)

Daniel is one of my favorites. He is a man sold out to God. No matter what life throws at him, he never once seems to waver. When he was a young man, he was carted off into exile in Babylon. A traumatic, painful experience. Once he arrived in Babylon, he was identified as a young man of promise and removed from his family. Sequestered in the king's household, he began training as a wise man. Someone who would counsel the king on the most important matters. Someone who would serve the empire and seek to expand its influence and power. One can easily imagine the internal struggle Daniel must have felt. How does he serve God faithfully while counseling one of the great tyrants in history? How does he speak God's truth to a pagan power? How does he maintain his integrity even as he counsels a king whose ego is out of control?

The challenges start early. As part of his training, he is presented with unclean food to eat. Right off the bat, he has a choice to make. Will he trust God or will he compromise his convictions? Here it is critical to note how Daniel responds. It will become the pattern for the rest of his life. "But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king." Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, "Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see." (Daniel 1:8-13) First and foremost, Daniel resolves to remain faithful to God's Law. He will not eat unclean food. At the same time, he recognizes his convictions put the chief eunuch in a tough position. If Daniel and his friends refuse to eat and start to suffer physically, the eunuch is going to be punished so Daniel comes up with a plan. Essentially, let us do it God's way for ten days and then compare us with the rest of the group. If we don't measure up, we'll do it your way. It's a brilliant approach. Daniel remains faithful to God. He is able to share with the eunuch the reason for his hope. And he treats the man with gentleness and respect.

Fast forward a few years. Now Daniel has taken his place among the wise men of Babylon. A decree goes out that everyone is to be killed because no one can pass the king's test. Once again, Daniel approaches the captain of the guard with gentleness and respect. He asks for an audience with the king. He trusts God to reveal the mystery in prayer. And when given his audience, he testifies to the greatness and power of God and the king humbles himself before him.

A few more years pass. The king grows so insecure he decides to build a monument to himself and demand everyone fall down in worship before it. It's the height of arrogance. Daniel doesn't appear in this story but his colleagues do. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego follow his example. Confronted with a situation which would force them to break the second commandment, they refuse to bow down in worship and instead stand faithful. The king is furious but the men answer him with grace and truth. "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." (Daniel 3:16-18) They are thrown into a furnace of fire. The king and his courtiers watch, waiting for them to be consumed. An incredible miracle

happens as God Himself appears and delivers them from death. The result is again the humbling of the king. "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God." (Daniel 3:28)

More years pass. More dreams and visions. The king actually goes insane for a period of time. Mysterious handwriting appears on a wall. Nebuchadnezzar gives way to Belshazzar who gives way to Darius. Political power shifts and once again Daniel finds himself put to the test. Now an old man, he has lived his life with great integrity. His political opponents try to dig up dirt on him but can't find any so they attack his faith. The core of who he is. They make it illegal to pray for thirty days. This is old hat for Daniel so he does what he always does. He continued his regular practice of prayer. When arrested, he humbly submitted to the king's injustice, trusting God with his fate. When God delivered him from the lions, Daniel answered the king with gentleness and respect, giving him the reason for the hope he has lived his whole life by. "O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm." (Daniel 6:21-22)

Daniel is an amazing example of faith to us all. In the way he lives his life, he shows us how to live and engage our increasingly non-Christian world in a faithful way. We do not have to relinquish our faith in Christ to serve in politics or business or education or any other field for that matter. Holding onto Christ in our hearts, we do have to be prepared to give an answer for the hope we have in Him. People will ask. They may wonder why we do the things we do or refuse to act in ways that are dishonest or morally compromised. We may be attacked for our faith at times. Through it all, we are not to respond with violence or anger or fight for our "rights" but instead stand firm with gentleness and respect. We are not to resort to the underhanded ways of this world to accomplish the will of God. We must not use the ways of this world to achieve the purposes of God. Instead, we must let go and let God act as He chooses. Use us as He pleases. Place our lives and our future in His hands.

September 14, 2018
PROPHETIC VISIONS

Readings for the day: Daniel 7-9

What the book of Daniel is most famous for are the visions Daniel sees in the night. So much ink has been spilt trying to interpret the meaning of these dreams. Are they historical? Referring to past events and past kingdoms that have come and gone? Do they tell the future? Of a time when the great Enemy will rise and attack God's people? Are they both? Can we learn from what has happened in the past and look for those same signs to take place in the future? And what does it all mean for the Christian in 21st century America? How does it all relate to our daily lives?

I think we often miss the forest for the trees when it comes to reading Scripture. We get so wrapped up in the details. So lost in the weeds. And we lose sight of the overarching message God has for us. Daniel and his people are in exile. They have experienced national trauma on a level we simply cannot grasp or imagine. Their pain and suffering is real and terrible. Their hopes and dreams have been crushed out of existence. Ground under the heel of a merciless pagan empire. Everything they once held dear has been destroyed. These are the circumstances in which God has placed Daniel. He has been a counselor to pagan kings. He has served foreign rulers. He has done all he can to embrace the call God placed on His people back in Jeremiah to "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." (Jeremiah 29:7) And he has prospered. He has been given power and authority. He has access and influence. He has wealth and privilege. He is considered one of the greatest wise men the empire has ever produced. But one thing continues to set Daniel apart...his great faith.

Daniel never loses sight of God. Never loses hope in a future restoration where God will act to deliver His people once again. Daniel trusts God. Daniel is faithful to God. At great personal risk, Daniel has demonstrated this faith over and over again. Lions. Fiery furnaces. Under threat of torture and death. Daniel has seen it all and done it all and not only survived but thrived. And now God is again visiting him with visions and dreams. He is showing him the future. Kings and empires will rise and fall. The pain and suffering they inflict will be great. The fear they will engender will cause many to flee. Safety and comfort will be in short supply. But over it all, there is this promise. God is in control. God is on the move. God is bringing human history to a predetermined end with Christ taking His seat in glory and His kingdom shall never end.

"As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened...I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." (Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14) Forget the four great beasts. Forget the visions of lions and eagles and bears. Rams and goats thundering towards one another across the earth. Forget the terrifying beast with ten horns or the little horn with the big mouth. The focus of Daniel's vision is on the One called the Ancient of Days. The One who reigns and rules over it all. Pure as driven snow. Engulfed in holy fire. Tens of thousands at his beck and call. He judges the earth. He judges kings and rulers. He holds all dominion and power in His hand. And He calls to the Son of Man. Out of the clouds of heaven comes the Christ and He is given all authority on heaven and on earth. All peoples and nations and tribes and tongues shall serve him. His kingdom shall never end. This is the main point of the vision Daniel receives. God letting his beloved prophet know He is not done. There is still hope. There will come a day when Christ shall come and all things shall be set right and made new.

And what happens to us on that great day? Listen to how Daniel describes it, "And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him." (Daniel 7:27) We get to share in this glory! We get to share in this victory! When Christ comes again in glory, we will be given dominion and power and authority to reign and rule at His side and under His Lordship! There will be no more sin. No more evil. No more crying. No more pain. No more suffering. No more fear. For God Himself will be our God and we shall be His people! This is the great hope of the gospel! The great hope sealed by Christ's death and resurrection! An empty tomb bears witness! Millions upon millions throughout history all stand to give their testimony! Christ has died! Christ has risen! Christ will come again!

September 15, 2018
DANIEL'S APOCALYPSE

Readings for the day: Daniel 10-12

Biblical prophets speak truth to power. Biblical prophets bring hope and assurance to God's people by reminding them of God's sovereign power and plan. Finally, Biblical prophets often foretell the future. This is certainly the case in Daniel 10-12. Here's a brief timeline...

535 BC – Third year of Cyrus the Great's reign. Daniel is now 85 years old and has been serving pagan kings for seventy years. Daniel's grief is most likely the result of the conflict those who have returned from exile under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra are facing as they rebuild both Jerusalem and the Temple. Daniel fasts for three weeks but unbeknownst to him, a battle is taking place in the heavenly realm. Gabriel – most likely the identity of the angelic being who visits Daniel - is at war with Satan and his demonic forces and only prevails with the help of another archangel named Michael. Gabriel has been sent by God to comfort Daniel. To give him hope for the future. Hard times are coming. Terrifying times. Forces will be arrayed in heaven and on earth against God's chosen people. Satan is seeking - as he always does - their complete eradication from the face of the earth. God, knowing what is to come, sends his angel to Daniel with a vision of the future so he can record it for future generations.

Three relatively minor kings follow Cyrus on throne. But the fourth referred to in Daniel 11 is Xerxes who ruled from 486-465 BC. His power and might was unrivaled at the time and as he seeks to expand his empire, he will provoke the might of Greece. After a number of years, Alexander the Great (336-323 BC) will unite the Greek into one empire and head east to destroy the Persians. Alexander dies tragically and his empire is then broken up into four pieces, ruled by four of his closest generals. The Ptolemaic (Southern king) faction goes to war with the Seleucids (Northern king) and their battle rages for generations with Israel as the primary "buffer state" in between. Eventually, a brutal tyrant named Antiochus Epiphanes IV will sweep down from the north and cause tremendous suffering for the people of God. "But he who comes against him shall do as he wills, and none shall stand before him. And he shall stand in the glorious land, with destruction in his hand." (Daniel 11:16) He will even seek to place a statue of Zeus in the Holy of Holies (abomination of desolation mentioned in 11:31) which in turn gives rise to the Maccabean revolt detailed in the Old Testament Apocryphal books of 1st and 2nd Maccabees.

All of this is ancient history to us but it was still very much in the future for Daniel. As God unpacks for him what is to come, he sees tremendous suffering ahead for his people. "And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time..." Under the influence of Haman, Xerxes will try to kill every single Jewish man, woman, and child within the borders of his empire. You can read all about this in the book of Esther. The wars between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid factions will take a tremendous toll on both land and people as many of the battles are fought in and around the borders of Israel. Pagan kings will rape and pillage and burn what God's people are trying to build. And the worst of them all – Antiochus Epiphanes IV - will literally torture and kill as many Jews as possible. At the same time these conflicts are raging on earth, there is a battle going on in heaven. Michael and his forces are fighting Satan and his demons and though the battle is fierce, they will prevail just as God's people will prevail on earth. This is why Daniel closes his book with such hopeful words, "But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever." (Daniel 12:1-3)

What's the relevance of all this history for God's people today? No matter what you are going through, know that God is with you. He is literally fighting at your side. He is bringing about His purposes and His will even

amidst your hardships. He will send His messengers to serve you. To comfort you. To bless you. He will bring you peace. Though you may experience suffering for a time, He will preserve your life. In fact, He has a reward waiting for you in His heavenly Kingdom. There the righteous will shine like stars in the sky and will reign with Him forever. As Christians, we do not place our hope in the things of this world. We do not place our hope in what we can achieve in this world. We place our hope in God alone.

September 17, 2018

REBUILDING

Readings for the day: 2 Chronicles 36:22-23, Ezra 1-3

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 confused. 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 follower. Those who would eventually be called "Christian" 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?

September 18, 2018

POLITICS

Readings for the day: Ezra 4-6

The return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon was a significant political event. Jerusalem was known throughout the region as a powerful and influential city. Once ruled by mighty kings with large armies who refused to bow the knee to the various empires who had attacked her over the years. Rebuilding her constituted a threat to the status quo. A threat to the established peace. A threat to the current political order. Furthermore, rebuilding the Temple was even more threatening. The Temple of God stood as the religious, social, and political center of the nation of Israel. To allow this structure to be rebuilt was to allow the people of God to reclaim their national identity. National identity leads to national pride. National pride would lead to calls for freedom, independence, and the re-establishment of the geographical borders laid out by God Himself. All of this created a lot of fear and unrest among the people who were living in the area at the time of the exile's return. Not only that but when they ask to join in the work, they are rejected. Not arbitrarily but because they are unclean and impure and God's Temple must remain holy as do God's people.

Thus begins a political back and forth. Letters are dispatched. Extensive searches are conducted in the archives of the empire. People leverage their influence and connections to try to either hinder or help the work. Names are dropped. Bribes offered. Anything to frustrate the purposes and plan of God. Initially, the political opponents of Israel are successful. The work ceases for a time. But God sends two prophets – both of whom we will read in a bit - with the message to resume work. To remember who has called them to this work. Who has authorized this work. And who gives them all the resources they need to accomplish this work. They answer to God alone and not to the kings and princes of this world. “We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished.” (Ezra 5:11)

It is tempting in our world today to think we need political cover to help us accomplish God's plan. It is tempting to cozy up to politicians and seek their approval for all we do. It is tempting to give them a platform at our events or in our churches or even in our pulpits with the hope that we will gain favor with them for the future. It is tempting to align ourselves with one political party or the other. It is tempting to rationalize the ungodly behavior of our political leaders with the hope we will gain access and influence. It is tempting to compromise our convictions in order to gain their support. Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah all remind us otherwise. Our hope is in Christ alone. Our future is held in God's hands. Only He can provide the resources to accomplish His plans. Only He can give us the power and authority to live and to walk in His ways. We serve a greater King and a greater Kingdom, friends! We are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us! We live in this world but we are not of this world! Our citizenship is held in heaven!

At the same time, we do live in the real world. We cannot withdraw or stick our heads in the sand. We cannot pretend like the world around us doesn't exist. We cannot ignore the very real problems our nation faces nor the challenges that confront our political leaders. We must pray for them. We must respect and honor them. Given the opportunity, we must seek to share God's wisdom with them. Influence them in ways that align with God's Kingdom. Confront them gently but firmly on their shortcomings. This is our calling in this world because we serve the God of heaven and earth who reigns and rules over all.

September 19, 2018
SELF-CENTERED VS. GOD-CENTERED

Readings for the day: Haggai 1-2

St. Augustine once wrote that the main problem with humanity is our disordered loves. Our misdirected desires. Our disoriented passions. Human beings were created perfect. Made in God's own image, each man, woman and child bears His likeness. In the Garden at the dawn of time, we experienced perfect fulfillment. Complete satisfaction. True joy. Nothing threatened our peace because all our passions and desires were directed towards pleasing God. We loved Him with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength. From this intimate relationship with our Heavenly Father flowed every blessing.

Then sin entered the world. Sin wrecked us at a foundational level. Psalm 51 says we are conceived in sin and born in iniquity. This brokenness exists on a cellular level. It is present from the moment the sperm meets the egg in the womb. Everyone is born this way. It is something we all hold in common though it takes different forms in each of our lives. Whatever passions, desires, and loves we are born with, they all are ultimately misdirected and disordered without Christ. What this means is that everything is oriented inward. Towards the self. So we take the good gifts God has given us and we primarily use them to self-promote. We take the good resources God has given us and we primarily use them to self-protect and self-provide. When we struggle, we turn to self-help. We seem obsessed with self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-fulfillment. Fundamentally, we have removed God from the center of our lives and replaced Him with the false god named Self.

We see this bear out in Haggai's time. The people of God returned from exile. They rebuilt their homes. They replanted their fields. They made sure to take care of themselves and their families first before turning to the work of God. "Then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now, therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes...Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord. You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors." (Haggai 1:3-6, 8-11) Was there anything wrong with building homes? Of course not. Anything wrong with planting fields? Nope. Anything wrong with eating and drinking and wearing clothes and earning a wage? Not at all. The key was the attitude of their hearts. They didn't put God first. They didn't seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. Instead, they were trying to do all life on some level without God. They were trying to make their own way in the world. They wanted to be self-sufficient. God confronts them on the sinful, selfish trajectory of their hearts. He exposes their disordered loves and calls them to repent. To demonstrate their love for Him by rebuilding His house.

Thankfully, the people of God respond. They obeyed God. And the result is the promise of His abiding presence. "I am with you, declares the Lord." (Haggai 1:13) There is no greater blessing than the Lord's presence in our lives. The people of God have always found peace and comfort and safety in His arms. God told Abraham He would be with him and his descendants forever. God commanded Moses to build a tabernacle in the wilderness so the people would always have a visible, tangible sign of His presence. God moved from tabernacle into the Temple during the reign of King Solomon. And it was the failure of the people to truly apprehend how unique and special it was for them to have such an intimate relationship with God that gets them in trouble and leads to exile. Now they've returned. They're rebuilding. They're re-establishing themselves in the Promised Land.

Surely the most important task they can set themselves to is to restore God's house so they can lift up His name in worship and praise!

Haggai is a very convicting read. Especially for 21st century American Christians. We are raised in a culture that prizes self-sufficiency. Idolizes the self-made man or woman. Stresses over self-protection. We are the richest nation on earth and yet, if we're totally honest, most of our wealth is spent on selfish pursuits. Most of our times is directed towards selfish ends. Most of our energy is wasted on selfish aims. Does this mean we never help others? Of course not. We often help others...because we love, in part, how it makes us feel. Does this mean we aren't generous? Of course not. We are a very generous nation...because we love, in part, the feelings of moral superiority it gives us. Does this mean every good thing we do is evil? Of course not. We simply have to recognize how sin wields its corrupting influence over our loves, passions, and desires.

So what's the answer? Jesus. Once we submit our lives to Christ, He deposits His Holy Spirit into our hearts. And once the Spirit takes up residence, He begins to go to work. Reordering our loves. Redirecting our desires. Re-orienting our passions towards God. We start to find joy as we worship and serve Him. We experience the peace that comes along with our awareness of His abiding presence. We start to discover a fulfillment and satisfaction we never thought possible because Christ is now our greatest treasure.

September 20, 2018
YAHWEH REMEMBERS

Readings for the day: Zechariah 1-7

Zechariah literally means “Yahweh Remembers.” And it’s an appropriate name when one considers the main message of the book. Despite all that has happened to Israel, Yahweh has not forgotten her. He has not forgotten her in her exile. Not abandoned her to destruction. Not left her for another people. He is still her God and she is still His people. Zechariah most likely returned from exile with his grandfather Iddo and father Berechiah. He came from a lineage of priests and in addition to this leadership mantle, was called by God to serve as a prophet alongside the much older Haggai. Whereas Haggai’s prophetic message had a convicting tone, Zechariah’s was more encouraging.

“Therefore say to them, Thus declares the Lord of hosts: Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts...” (Zechariah 1:3)

“And the Lord answered gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me. So the angel who talked with me said to me, 'Cry out, Thus says the Lord of hosts: I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion.” (Zechariah 1:13-14)

“Therefore, thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; my house shall be built in it, declares the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. Cry out again, Thus says the Lord of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.” (Zechariah 1:16-17)

“Jerusalem shall be inhabited as villages without walls, because of the multitude of people and livestock in it. And I will be to her a wall of fire all around, declares the Lord, and I will be the glory in her midst.” (Zechariah 2:4-5)

“Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I come and I will dwell in your midst, declares the Lord. And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people. And I will dwell in your midst, and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. And the Lord will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem.” (Zechariah 2:10-12)

“And the angel said to those who were standing before him, "Remove the filthy garments from him." And to him he said, "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments...Thus says the Lord of hosts: If you will walk in my ways and keep my charge, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here.” (Zechariah 3:4, 7)

“Then he said to me, "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts. Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain. And he shall bring forward the top stone amid shouts of 'Grace, grace to it!'" (Zechariah 4:6-7)

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, "Behold, the man whose name is the Branch: for he shall branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord. It is he who shall build the temple of the Lord and shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne. And there shall be a priest on his throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.” (Zechariah 6:12-13)

These are among the most glorious promises Israel has ever received. They speak of honor and blessing and restoration. They refer to the rebuilding of the Temple. The restoration of the priesthood. The glory of the worship that will once again fill the Lord's house. God is raising up political leaders like Zerubbabel and religious leaders like Joshua to guide and direct God's people to carry out the work God has planned for them. They will again be a light to the nations and will bless the people of the earth. Every obstacle that might rise in their path, God Himself will lay low. Most of all, God's name will once again receive the glory it deserves.

It is easy at times to feel forgotten. It is easy at times to believe God has somehow abandoned us. When we experience pain and hardship. Suffering and struggle. Trials and temptation. It is easy to lose sight of God in the midst of it all. Zechariah reminds us God never forgets. God never abandons or forsakes us. He never leave us on our own. He is always with us. He will complete the work He began in us. He bring to pass the plans He has for us. He never fails. He is always faithful. No matter what you may be facing today, God is with you. The Lord of hosts is on your side. Trust Him. Believe Him. Lean on Him for strength. Remember what He said to Zerubbabel. Not by might. Not by power. But by My Spirit, says the Lord!

September 21, 2018
MESSIANIC PROPHECIES

Readings for the day: Zechariah 8-14

Anyone who is familiar at all with the gospel story will recognize the Messianic prophecies embedded throughout Zechariah's visions. This is a critical reminder of the importance of the Old Testament. We have to understand the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the climax of a story that has been unfolding for centuries. Jesus is the true fulfillment of the covenant God first established with Abraham. He is the true seed. The promised Son. The faithful Israelite. He is the perfect embodiment of God's eternal plan and its fulfillment. Throughout the Old Testament, as God interacted with His people, He dropped clues as to what was coming. The "Day of the Lord" it was often called. A day when the Messiah would come and Israel would be saved. The people of God looked for this day. Longed for this day. Prayed for this day. Especially in periods of great hardship and suffering. So again, Zechariah is prophesying at a time of great change and upheaval. Decades of exile and slavery has come to an end. The people have survived Babylon. They've survived attempts at genocide. They've survived attempts to forcefully assimilate them into a broader, pagan culture. And now they've returned home. To a ruined city. To ruined homes. To a ruined Temple. Time to start over. Where will life go from here? Will God remain faithful? What life will they build? These are the fundamental questions they're asking and God sends Haggai, Nehemiah, Ezra, and Zechariah – among others - with the answer.

He gives them a picture of the future. When Messiah's Kingdom comes to earth. And so we read familiar words like...

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."
(Zechariah 9:9)

"Then I said to them, "If it seems good to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them." And they weighed out as my wages thirty pieces of silver. Then the Lord said to me, "Throw it to the potter"—the lordly price at which I was priced by them. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord, to the potter." (Zechariah 11:12-13)

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn." (Zechariah 12:10)

"And the Lord will be king over all the earth. On that day the Lord will be one and his name one." (Zechariah 14:9)

And these words – often quoted or alluded to throughout the New Testament – remind us God is in control. God reigns sovereign over all the earth. His plan is being worked out. His purposes are coming to pass. His will is being done on earth as it is in heaven.

Until that great Day comes, what should then we do? Cling to hope. Cling to faith. Cling to God. He will never let us down. His promises are sure. His faithfulness is great. His steadfast love is loyal and true. Zechariah encourages us just as he encouraged God's people so many centuries ago.

"Thus says the Lord: I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain...Thus says the Lord of hosts: Behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country, and I will bring them to dwell in

the midst of Jerusalem. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness." (Zechariah 8:3, 7-8)

"On that day the Lord their God will save them, as the flock of his people; for like the jewels of a crown they shall shine on his land. For how great is his goodness, and how great his beauty!" (Zechariah 9:16-17)

"I will strengthen the house of Judah, and I will save the house of Joseph. I will bring them back because I have compassion on them, and they shall be as though I had not rejected them, for I am the Lord their God and I will answer them." (Zechariah 10:6)

The Lord is our God. We are His people. When we call on Him, He will answer. When we knock, the door is always open. When we've sinned, there is always grace. Believe this for your life today!

September 22, 2018

PERSECUTION

Readings for the day: Esther 1-5

“There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them.” (Esther 3:8)

God's people have always been at risk. The systematic murder of the Hebrew children in Egypt. The battles they fought on their way to the Promised Land. The invasions of the Assyrians and Babylonians. This genocidal order from Haman the Agagite. The Jews will suffer under the Seleucid empire in the intertestamental period. They will be persecuted by the Romans for their “atheism.” (The Romans couldn't understand the lack of idols.) There will be pogroms in Europe during the medieval period as anti-Semitism became popular culminating in Hitler's Final Solution. Even after the modern state of Israel was created, the Arab nations surrounding them promised to annihilate them completely. There is just something about the people of God that sets the pagan world on edge.

The same is true for Christians. In the early days, Christians were understood to be just another Jewish sect. Rising out of the synagogue, they proclaimed to worship a Jewish Messiah. Like their Jewish brothers and sisters, they didn't worship idols. Refused to bow down to other gods. Willingly went to their deaths in the arena rather than recant their faith. They answered to a higher law than the laws of the kingdoms of this earth and that set the empires of this world on edge. They were killed in Rome. Killed in China. Killed in Japan. Killed in the Amazon. All over the world, Christians have spilt their blood and continue to do so to this day. All for the cause of Christ.

Esther is a heroic story. The story of how one teenage woman was positioned by God in order to deliver His people. Esther is a savior. A messiah in a sense. She was raised up “for such a time as this” and she answered the call. She was courageous. She was brilliant. She was faithful. And even though God isn't mentioned in this story, He certainly hovers in the background sovereignly orchestrating all things.

Esther is our story. All of us – young and old alike - have been positioned by God in some way to be salt and light in this world. Salt not only brings out flavor but acts as a preservative. Light not only illumines the night but provides safety as it chases away the darkness. The church of Jesus Christ has been sent into the world to help preserve and protect. We heal those who are hurting. We visit the sick and dying. We minister to those in prison. We provide for widows and orphans. We take the side of the downtrodden and oppressed. We fight for those in bondage and slavery. We take up the cause of God's justice in the world. This works itself out in large scale, globally significant projects and it works itself out in everyday encounters at the office, in the classroom, with our neighbors, friends, and family.

Why do we live the way we do? Why do we keep laws no other nation or kingdom or tribe understands? Why do we embrace our unique identity as God's chosen people? For the Jew, it is because they remember they were once slaves in Egypt and God delivered them with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. For the Christian, it is because we remember we too were once “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” (Ephesians 2:12) But now God has delivered us with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. He reached down from heaven and saved us by the blood of His Son. He “who has made us has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14) and become our peace. This is what sustains us through every trial and temptation. Through every persecution and pain. Through all struggle and suffering. I consider all things rubbish for the sake of knowing Christ.

September 24, 2018
DIVINE REVERSAL

Readings for the day: Esther 6-10

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!

September 25, 2018

OFFERING

Readings for the day: Malachi 1-4, Psalm 50

I am the parent of four teenagers. They are all strong-willed. All independent thinkers. They are all straining at the leash, longing to be on their own. I love it. It's exactly how it should be. But they aren't ready yet and my job in this phase of life is to coach them. To encourage them. To guide them. How do I know they aren't ready? Because their attitude and effort is still subpar. They don't complete their work all the way. They leave far too many things undone. They struggle to submit. They struggle to take responsibility. They are afraid of – in their words – “adulting.” I get it. I remember feeling the same way when I was their age.

When I read Malachi, it feels to me like God is dealing with a bunch of adolescents. Believers whose attitude and effort is subpar. Yes, they bring their sacrifices to the Lord but they are blemished. Yes, they meet their obligations in worship but it's not their firstfruits. They say and do all the right things but their hearts are not pure. They are just going through the motions. And God knows all this! He sees the sacrifices they have to offer.

“When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil?” (Malachi 1:8) He sees right through all the BS. “Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it.” (Malachi 2:3) He knows their tears are simply for show. “You cover the Lord's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. But you say, “Why does he not?”

Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless...”

(Malachi 2:13-14) He can count. He knows they aren't giving in accordance with His commands. “Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions.”

(Malachi 3:8) And yet, when confronted with their sin, what do the people do? They protest. Throw up their hands. Stomp their feet. Raise their voices. Shift the blame. It's typical adolescent behavior.

What is God's desire? He wants His people to grow. He wants them to be strong. He wants them to be wholly devoted to His great name. “For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts...For I am a great King, says the Lord of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations.” (Malachi 1:11, 14) He wants His people to be pure of heart and true in faith. “My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him. It was a covenant of fear, and he feared me. He stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.” (Malachi 2:5-7) His desire is to bless and not curse. To give and not withhold. To pour out abundance upon them so that they nations will see all God has done. “Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the Lord of hosts. Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts.” (Malachi 3:10-12)

But God also knows our hearts. He knows what He expects is impossible for us to achieve. He knows the corruption that exists at the core of our being. The sin that so easily entangles. We brought this on ourselves and God has been trying to teach us how helpless and hopeless we are without Him. So He will send His messenger to accomplish all that we could not. He will be the Faithful One. He will be the True Israelite. He will be the Messiah and Savior of all who believe. “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord.” (Malachi 3:1-3) He will purify our offerings. He will sanctify our hearts. He will make us righteous before the Lord.

September 26, 2018
RACISM IN THE BIBLE?

Readings for the day: Ezra 7-10

Today's reading 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 the men to take more than one wife. Polygamy is not God’s design for marriage so 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?

September 27, 2018
THE WORK OF PRAYER

Readings for the day: Nehemiah 1-4

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. 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. 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.

September 28, 2018
RELINQUISHING OUR RIGHTS

Readings for the day: Nehemiah 5-7

The call of the gospel is to lay down our lives for others. To do as Jesus did. Jesus is God. As such, He could have chosen to hold onto His divine right to rule. His divine right to reign. His divine right to wield authority and power and compel obedience. But Jesus relinquished those rights. He laid them aside. Taking on the form of a servant. He became obedient even unto death. And not just any death but the most humiliating, degrading death possible. Death on a cross. At any time, He could have called down legions of angels to crush His enemies. At any time, He could have taken back up His authority and destroyed His enemies. But Jesus relinquished His rights because He had a greater prize in mind...the approval of His Heavenly Father. Jesus put no stock in the ways of this world. The accolades of this world. The kingdoms of this world. The treasures of this world. He placed no value on anything this world had to offer and instead looked to the world to come for His hope. This is why His Father exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name above every name. His willingness to lay everything down in humble obedience to His Father's will was vindicated by His resurrection, ascension, and exaltation.

I see Christ in Nehemiah. A man who was willing to relinquish his rights and lay everything down for the sake of God's people. A man who put service to His nation above his own well-being. He had every right to demand tribute as governor. He had every right to levy taxes and exact a heavy toll on his constituents. He had every right to demand a portion of the interest the wealthy had placed on the poor. But he gave all that up and by doing so, set a godly example before the people. "From the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah...neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. 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...But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. I also persevered in the work...we acquired no land...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." (Nehemiah 5:14-19) And how did the people respond to such godly leadership? The rich forgave the debts of the poor. Land was restored to their rightful owners. Interest was no longer accrued. The people were set free. Such acts of generosity were a sign to everyone that God was in their midst.

What about us? We live in a nation consumed with selfishness and greed. Everyone seems out to get "theirs." Everyone is concerned about protecting their "rights." Everyone wants justice. The problem is we don't all share the same view of justice. We believe all truth is relative. We all want an equal share but often refuse to make equal sacrifice. Too many feel entitled to what they have rather than view it as a gift from God. Too many do all they can to protect what they have rather than walk with open hands. Too many hoard all they have rather than give generously. And here I am just talking about the Christians! The very people who claim to follow Christ!

It is estimated that if every American who called themselves a Christian tithed, an additional 165 billion dollars could be raised? Think of the global problems that could be solved with that kind of money! According to the United Nations, 25 billion dollars could relieve world hunger, starvation and death from preventable disease within five years. 12 billion could eliminate illiteracy in five years. 15 billion could solve the world's water and sanitation issues. 1 billion could fully fund all overseas mission work. Do all that and you would still have almost 100 billion left over! (Source: www.relevantmagazine.com/love-and-money/what-would-happen-if-the-church-tithed) Imagine how the reputation of the church would change if we got serious about following the example of our Savior and laid down our lives for others? Imagine how the world would change if the church would relinquish her rights and instead sought to serve? Imagine how many lives would be saved if we truly embraced the heart of the gospel like Nehemiah and so many others who have gone before us?

September 29, 2018
TELL THE OLD, OLD STORY

Readings for the day: Nehemiah 8-10

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. As we head into the New Testament, we must hold onto our history. 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.