

BIBLE IN A YEAR

BIBLE, FOLLOWING JESUS, DISCIPLESHIP

2019

STUDY AND COMMENTARY

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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SEPTEMBER

September 1, 2019 READINGS FOR THE DAY

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September 3, 2019 HARD-WIRED FOR CONNECTION

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September 4, 2019 TRUE REPENTANCE

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 7-9, 2 Corinthians 7:8-16, Psalms 48, Proverbs 22:17-19

September 5, 2019 FINDING TRUE JOY

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September 1, 2019
READINGS FOR THE DAY

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

Readings for TOMORROW: Ecclesiastes 1-3, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, Psalms 46, Proverbs 22:15

September 2, 2019
CHASING THE WIND

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 1-3, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, Psalms 46, Proverbs 22:15

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Ecclesiastes 4-6, 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:7, Psalms 47, Proverbs 22:16

September 3, 2019
HARD-WIRED FOR CONNECTION

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 4-6, 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:7, Psalms 47, Proverbs 22:16

It is not good for human beings to be alone. From the opening pages of Scripture we hear these words and we know in our bones they are true. We are suffering through an epidemic of loneliness in our country these days. So many people feel like they have no one to talk to. No shoulder to cry on. No one to lean on when times get hard. No close friendships. The surgeon general recently released a study calling loneliness a major health crisis. It is one of the major sources of depression, self-harm, and suicide. It reduces our life expectancy. Many therapists I talk to tell me that much of their practice is simply sitting and listening to people share about their daily lives. Their clients aren't seeking therapy so much as friendship. This is not to minimize the very real mental health crisis in our country today only to point out that one of the root causes is a lack of any kind of deep relationships.

Over and against this lonely way of life, the Teacher in Ecclesiastes offers this sound advice. "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken." (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12) Now I know we usually reserve these verses for weddings but they apply to all of life. Woe to the one who falls and is alone. Woe to the one who is cold and is alone. Woe to the one who is attacked and is alone. I'm sure we've all had these experiences at some point in time and it is painful.

God made us for community. He created us as relational beings. Cast in His image, we are built to relate to others in the same way the members of the Trinity relate to one another. Our hearts crave deep relationships. Our souls need to be knit together with other people. We all have this longing deep within. Not only that but we were created for a relationship with God! A threefold cord is not quickly broken! As we intertwine our lives with God's life and with the lives of other people, we find ourselves growing stronger, more confident, and more at peace. With God at our side and our brothers and sisters at our backs, we can withstand anything. This is how life was intended to be but sin separates. Separates us from God. Separates us from one another. So we must repent. Repent of our ungodly impulse to "go it alone." Repent of the excuses we make that keep us separated from community and from the Lord Himself. Repent of the way we prioritize tasks and activities and technology over face to face interaction with the people we love.

I learned a long time ago that God most often shows up in my life with skin on. He speaks to me and He ministers to me through flesh and blood people. My family. My friends. My colleagues. My church family. I am blessed by these relationships and the more I let them into my life, the more I am encouraged, comforted, strengthened, and inspired to live for Christ. This was true even for the Apostle Paul. Listen to how he describes the blessing he received from Titus..."For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more." (2 Corinthians 7:5-7)

Who is God sending into your life? Who has He sent and what are you doing to grow that relationship? Are you open to new relationships? New people? New experiences? Or do you find yourself pulling back? Isolating? Growing more and more lonely with each passing day? Don't believe the lie, friends! You were made for community! You were built for relationships! You are hard-wired for connection! Lean into Christ! Lean into your family! Lean into your friendships! Let God fill your soul!

Readings for tomorrow: Ecclesiastes 7-9, 2 Corinthians 7:8-16, Psalms 48, Proverbs 22:17-19

September 4, 2019
TRUE REPENTANCE

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 7-9, 2 Corinthians 7:8-16, Psalms 48, Proverbs 22:17-19

John the Baptist came preaching a message of repentance. Jesus came preaching a message of repentance. Paul traveled all over the known world at the time preaching a message of repentance. Clearly “repentance” lies at the heart of the Christian faith. But what is repentance? Is it simply saying sorry to God? An existential feeling of guilt or condemnation? A deep sense that we are wrong? And how does one actually “repent?” Kneel in sackcloth and ashes? Engage in self-harm like the monks of old? Beat oneself up emotionally and spiritually? Subject oneself to rigorous, daily self-examination?

I love how Paul describes repentance in 2 Corinthians 7:10, “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.” The key to repentance is the fruit it produces in a person’s life. If your grief – as deep and profound as it may be - produces death it is not from God. On the other hand, if your grief leads to salvation without regret than you can be sure it is from the Lord.

I cannot tell you the number of times I have counseled someone whose grief only produced death. They were sorry they got caught. Sorry for the mess they found themselves in. Sorry for the way life turned out. Sorry for the bad choices they made. But they weren’t sorry enough to make a change. Their sorrow did not lead to repentance. It did not lead to surrender. It did not lead to submission. They still wanted control. Still wanted to be in charge. Still wanted to justify themselves. So we’d scratch the surface of their grief only to find excuses. Blame-shifting. Denial. As a result, their lives seemed perpetually locked in a death spiral.

At the same time, I have had the joy of walking with people through their grief as it produced salvation. Their sorrow was less about them and more about God. They had come face to face with the depth of their sin. The depth of their depravity. They realized no matter how hard they tried, they simply didn’t have it in them to make things right. In their despair, they cast themselves at the foot of the cross where they found freedom and healing. Hope for their journey. And all their regrets. All the guilt from past mistakes. All the shame they carried was washed away. They fixed their eyes on Christ. They surrendered to His love. Submitted to His will. Gave Him control over their lives. Scratch the surface of their grief and you find beauty. Joy. Peace. And they enter a virtuous cycle of living that leads to fulfillment and true happiness.

Where do you find yourself this morning? When confronted by the Spirit or by other people in your life over mistakes you have made. Sins you have committed. Ways you have fallen short and let people down. How do you respond? Is your grief grounded in Christ or in the world? Does your repentance lead to a changed life or are you still holding onto past regrets? Let me encourage you to let go of the death-dealing ways of this world so that you may receive the life-giving Spirit of Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Ecclesiastes 10-12, 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, Psalms 49, Proverbs 22:20-21

September 5, 2019
FINDING TRUE JOY

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 10-12, 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, Psalms 49, Proverbs 22:20-21

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So how do you experience the world? When you wake up in the morning, what's your expectation? Do you walk into life eyes wide open to both the good and the bad? Are you willing to embrace the ups and downs? Do you understand that life will be filled with pleasure and pain? Accomplishment and adversity? Success and failure? And do you seek the deeper joy God offers us in Jesus Christ? I love what Jesus himself says in the Sermon on the Mount, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?...And which

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

Readings for tomorrow: Song of Songs 1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:16-24, Psalms 50, Proverbs 22:22-23

September 6, 2019
SEX AND GOD

Readings for today: Song of Songs 1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:16-24, Psalms 50, Proverbs 22:22-23

The Song of Solomon is one of the most difficult and least understood books in all of Scripture. It's one we tend to avoid in our sex-saturated culture. The language is far too intimate. The imagery too graphic. We don't want to picture it much less reflect on how the Spirit might speak to us through it. So we flip through the pages as fast as we can to get to the end so we can avoid any embarrassment.

But what is this book about? The love of a man for a woman? The love of God for His church? Perhaps both? Are we comfortable thinking about our relationship with God in sexual terms? Or is that a bridge too far? It certainly was for many of the ancient rabbi's. They put a content warning on this book, restricting it to those who were 30 and over. Then again, the ancient church often read this text as they approached the Lord's Table. They recognized the deep intimacy God desires to have with us and they affirmed such love by tying this book to the most sacred act of worship. I firmly believe the Bible is inviting us to approach God in the most intimate of ways. The language of the Song is meant to arouse. Meant to touch the deepest places of our hearts. Meant to draw us into intimate embrace with the Father.

Our inability to embrace this book reveals how deep our corruption runs. We are so confused when it comes to human sexuality. We have bought the lie that it's all about our personal pleasure. We have depersonalized it through pornography, casual hook ups, and apps like Tinder. We see sex as dirty yet secretly gratifying. Something to be enjoyed and yet something to be feared. Our culture boasts of sexual freedom but then seems shocked when such freedom leads to broken relationships, disease, abuse, and violence. We want all the pleasures sex brings but none of the responsibility. If there's anything the #MeToo movement has taught us, it is that our sexual appetites are insatiable. Our lusts are impossible to satisfy. Sexuality without restraint is destructive and traumatic.

And yet, sex is God's creation. Sexuality is something He instilled within each of us. We are created as sexual beings and when the Bible talks about "knowing" another person, it often uses the most sexually intimate of terms. The same is true for "knowing" God. God designed sex to be the ultimate experience of "knowing." A way for us to express our deepest affections. Our deepest emotions. Our deepest vulnerabilities. All within the safety of the covenant bonds of marriage between a man and a woman. All within the safety of the covenant bond we share with Jesus.

So is it possible to see the Song of Solomon as a prayer? As a way to express the deepest desires of our hearts to God? As a way for us to ask for deeper intimacy with Him? Or does our broken human experience of sexuality warp our thinking? Corrupt how we understand this most powerful and primal of drives? Does it poison this well and thus prevent us from fully grasping the depth of relationship God desires to have with us? There's a reason Christ calls the church His "bride." There's a reason God so often refers to Himself in the Old Testament as a "husband" and Israel as his "wife." Marriage is the place where a man and a woman become "one flesh" before the Lord and it is designed to point beyond itself to something even greater...the "oneness" God desires to have with His people for all eternity.

Readings for tomorrow: Song of Songs 5-8, 2 Corinthians 9, Psalms 51, Proverbs 22:24-25

September 7, 2019
DEATH-DEFYING LOVE

Readings for today: Song of Songs 5-8, 2 Corinthians 9, Psalms 51, Proverbs 22:24-25

“Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised.” (The Song of Solomon 8:6-7)

I will admit I am partial to these verses. My wife inscribed them on my wedding ring. We've been together almost twenty-five years at this point and I can honestly say these words ring true now more than ever. Now life has not been a fairy tale. It's been hard. We've weathered some storms. The loss of a child. The failure of a ministry. The dangerously premature birth of our twins. Our children have struggled and fought many battles. Kristi and I have not always been the best parents. We certainly have not always treated each other well. In fact, I almost lost her several years ago due to workaholism and neglect. So we've had our ups and downs. But what we've learned through it all is that many waters cannot quench love. Many floods cannot drown it. Not if it's founded on the love God has for us.

As I mentioned in my last devotional, the Song of Solomon is not simply a human love poem. Traditionally it has been interpreted as describing the love God has for His people. It is God who sets us as a seal on His heart. It is God who sets us as a seal on His arm. It is God's love that is as strong as death. His love that is as fierce as the grave. When the devil offered Jesus the entire world in exchange for love, Jesus utterly despised him. God's love is eternal. Steadfast. Loyal. True. It is the one sure thing in this uncertain world in which we live.

Ponder the love of God today, friends. A love that will not let you go. A love that will relentlessly pursue you until the day you die. A love that was demonstrated on the Cross. A love that defeated the grave. A love that lives even now eternal in the heavens. A love that is being poured out continually by the Holy Spirit onto God's people so they will share it with the world. This love is available to us! This love never runs dry! Trusting in this love will save your marriage! It will transform your family! It will deepen your friendships! It will change everything. If you let it. If you will simply let Christ reign and rule in your heart. Rest in this love, friends. Let God quiet you with His love. May you walk today in His love and may you experience the blessing that comes from abiding in His love.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 1-2, 2 Corinthians 10, Psalms 52, Proverbs 22:26-27

September 8, 2019
READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Isaiah 1-2, 2 Corinthians 10, Psalms 52, Proverbs 22:26-27

Readings for TOMORROW: Isaiah 3-5, 2 Corinthians 11:1-15, Psalms 53, Proverbs 22:28-29

September 9, 2019
FAITH AND POLITICS

Readings for today: Isaiah 3-5, 2 Corinthians 11:1-15, Psalms 53, Proverbs 22:28-29

“The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.” (Isaiah 1:1)

The book of Isaiah begins with a political statement. Everything he says from this point forward (66 chapters!) must be viewed through a distinctly political lens. Uzziah. Jotham. Ahaz. Hezekiah. We know their stories. We've read their histories in the Kings and Chronicles. We know Uzziah reigned for over fifty years and for the most part remained faithful to God. However, at the end of his life he grew proud and brazenly entered the Temple to offer sacrifices. We know his son, Jotham, reigned for sixteen years and also remained faithful to the Lord but failed to address the nation's ongoing idolatry on the high places. We know Ahaz reigned for sixteen years and was an evil, faithless king. The entire kingdom suffered under his rule. We know Hezekiah returned to the ways of the Lord, experienced the miracle of healing, but also grew prideful and set his descendants up for disaster when he shows off his riches to the envoys of Babylon.

Isaiah presumably witnesses all of this. He sees it all go past. He lives it. His prophetic career begins at some point during the glory days under King Uzziah and ends at some point during the reign of King Hezekiah. Through it all, he watches his nation shift its allegiance from Yahweh to other gods. He watches his nation descend into cultural chaos as they abandon true worship and true righteousness. He watches the leaders of his nation attempt to reform and revitalize the country. He sees the ups and downs of their efforts. The successes and failures. He sees it all and then offers this Word from the Lord. It is honest. Real. Raw. No holds barred. He confronts. He speaks the truth. He calls out his own people. “Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.” (Isaiah 1:4) “For Jerusalem has stumbled, and Judah has fallen, because their speech and their deeds are against the Lord, defying his glorious presence. For the look on their faces bears witness against them; they proclaim their sin like Sodom; they do not hide it. Woe to them! For they have brought evil on themselves.” (Isaiah 3:8-9) “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight! Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink, who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right!” (Isaiah 5:20-23)

At the same time, he offers hope. He calls them to repentance. He begs them to return to the Lord to find grace and healing and mercy. “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. "Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” (Isaiah 1:16-18) He directs their attention to the glorious day of the Lord when all flesh shall witness the appearance of our God. “It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 2:2-3) He calls them back to faithfulness. Back to loyalty. Back to a right relationship with God. “In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel. And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory there will be a canopy. There will be a booth for shade by day from the heat, and for a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.” (Isaiah 4:2-6)

Once can easily recognize the parallels to our own time. How many of us lament the state of our nation? How many of us lament the moral drift of our culture? How many of us lament the pain and suffering and sin and degradation we see all around us? How many of us have given into the temptation of fighting for the lesser of two evils? Letting the ends justify the means in our political process? Yes, we lament the lack of prayer in our schools. We lament the absence of the Ten Commandments in our public spaces. We lament the way crosses are being torn down. Christians targeted for their beliefs. The encroaching secularism that threatens to push our faith to the margins. And yet, are we willing to confront the deeper questions of why prayer doesn't seem to fill our homes? Why the Ten Commandments aren't posted and followed in our churches? Why we refuse to deny ourselves and pick up our own crosses? Why we have marginalized our faith by refusing to share Christ with our neighbors, friends, and co-workers? Are we not as guilty as the people Isaiah was speaking to? And are we willing to hear the Word of the Lord as it is spoken through Isaiah to us? Are we willing to repent and return and re-commit ourselves to God's ways?

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

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 6-7, 2 Corinthians 11:16-33, Psalms 54, Proverbs 23:1-3

September 10, 2019
PROPHETIC SIGNS

Readings for today: Isaiah 6-7, 2 Corinthians 11:16-33, Psalms 54, Proverbs 23:1-3

“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12)

The prophetic books are difficult to interpret. Mainly because they often have a double-meaning. They speak the truth to current events happening in their own day and time but they also often predict what will take place in the future as well. Such is certainly the case in Isaiah 7:14. “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” This is one of the great Messianic texts Matthew picks up in his gospel but it also has immediate implications for King Ahaz. Ahaz is staring down the barrel of a great invasion. His worst enemies, Syrian and Ephraim, have joined forces to conquer his kingdom. Ahaz and his people are rightly afraid. Isaiah 7:2 even says their hearts “shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.” In the midst of their fear, God sends Isaiah with a Word of comfort. A Word of hope. A Word of victory. “And say to him, 'Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah...thus says the Lord God: "It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass. For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin. And within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered from being a people. And the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.” (Isaiah 7:4, 7-9) But Ahaz does not accept the Word of the Lord. He cannot believe it. Ahaz has spent his entire life worshiping other gods so it shouldn't surprise us when he doesn't recognize Yahweh's voice. So God takes it one step further. Not only does He give Ahaz a Word of promise but also a tangible sign to hold onto so he knows these things will come to pass. “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria!” (Isaiah 7:14-17) Some scholars suggest this is Isaiah's son who appears in the next chapter. Others suggest it is the name given to a baby born in the king's household, an event unrecorded in the Bible. Whichever it is, the point is that God will bring to pass His will for both Syria and Samaria as the Assyrian Empire rises up, spills its banks, and floods through both regions. This is the immediate meaning of the prophecy.

There is an eschatological meaning as well. As mentioned above, Matthew picks up this text and applies it to the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. The ultimate sign of comfort. The ultimate sign of hope. The ultimate sign of God's victory on behalf of His people. Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin and enters this world to bring eternal life through His death and resurrection. Because of Christ, we do not need to be afraid. We will not fall before our enemies. We are not left to the mercy of our circumstances. We are no longer enslaved to sin. We are set free. By His great love and mercy and grace. Like Ahaz, we hear these words, “Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint...” (Isaiah 7:4) And we are reminded again to place our trust in God.

I've been reading through the Scriptures for over two decades now. I read through the Bible every year. I study it in-depth both personally and for my profession. I have spent countless hours meditating and praying over these texts and here is what I've discovered. Not only does Scripture have an immediate meaning for those like Ahaz who are hearing it for the first time. And not only does it often have a secondary meaning as it relates to Jesus Christ or future world events. It also takes on a third meaning. A personal application in my own life. When I read these stories and place myself in Ahaz's shoes and try to imagine his fear and trepidation; I realize God is speaking to my life as well. My circumstances. My struggles. My fears. How often have I stood face to face with my own enemies? My heart shaking like a tree before the wind? How often has God brought me a Word of comfort, hope, and promise in those moments? How many times have I graciously been given a sign? How many times as I have waited on the Lord have I seen Him come through? Deliver the victory? My job is simply to wait. To hold onto faith. To trust. To surrender. To let Him do the work. When I do, I can look back and see the hand of God as He sovereignly directs all things according to His will in my life for my good and for His glory.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 8-9, 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, Psalms 55, Proverbs 23:4-5

September 11, 2019
FEAR OF THE LORD

Readings for today: Isaiah 8-9, 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, Psalms 55, Proverbs 23:4-5

“But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he will become a sanctuary...” (Is. 8:13-14)

I have always loved the juxtaposition of these verses. Fear. Dread. Sanctuary. How in the world does all this work? It seems like God is asking for mutually exclusive things. On the one hand, he wants us to fear him to the point of dread. Let that sink in for a moment. God is asking us to be afraid of him. Afraid of the one who can cast our souls into hell. Afraid of the one who rightfully and righteously acts as our supreme judge. Afraid of the one who brought us into this world and certainly can take us out. We should be afraid of God. He is holy and we are not. He is perfect and we are not. He is all-powerful. All-knowing. Always present. Nothing is hidden from his sight. Nothing escapes his notice. Nothing is too insignificant or beneath him. He is in all and through all and in him all things hold together. He reigns and rules from a throne established outside time and space. He is the Lord of glory and the Lord of hosts. Legions of angels serve at his command. His will is immutable. His character is unchangeable. His kingdom is unshakable. He is wholly other. Awesome in might and majesty. We enter into his presence with our faces pressed to the ground. Fear is completely appropriate when we consider the gulf that exists between us and God.

At the same time, God promises to be our sanctuary. Those who honestly fear the Lord. Who honor God as holy with their lives. Who offer their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. God extends an invitation to dwell with him. To come under his protection. To be supplied by his provision. To receive grace and mercy instead of judgment and wrath. To those who enter into his presence by faith in Jesus Christ. Faith in the one whom God sent to be the perfect sacrifice for sin. Faith in the one who lived in perfect submission and perfect obedience to his Father’s will. Faith in the one who not only died but rose again bodily from the grave. To these he gives the gift of adoption. They become sons and daughters of God. They become part of God’s family. They are set apart as God’s chosen people. God himself becomes their sanctuary.

Such people have no need of fear for the perfect love of God revealed in Jesus Christ casts out all fear. Fear has to do with punishment. Fear has to do with God’s righteous judgment on human sin. But Christ Jesus has taken our place. He has endured the punishment we deserved. He has endured the wrath of God on our behalf and turned it away. Perfectly satisfying God’s judgment. Perfectly meeting all the demands of justice. He completes the work. He serves the full sentence. He endures what we could not and opens the door to forgiveness and grace. His blood makes perfect atonement for our sin and all those who believe in him are now invited to make God their sanctuary. To run into his arms. To enter into his presence with thanksgiving and praise. The way to the holy of holies is now wide open for any and all who call on the name of the Lord and are saved.

Do you believe this? Does your life reflect this reality? Do you fear God and honor him as holy? Have you placed your faith in Christ? Do you believe the death he died, he died for you? Do you believe the blood he shed, he shed for you? Do you believe the victory he won, he won for you? If so, you have nothing to fear. You are a child of God. Accepted. Beloved. Chosen by God before the foundations of the world.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 10-11, 2 Corinthians 12:11-21, Psalms 56, Proverbs 23:6-8

September 12, 2019
THE SALVATION OF GOD

Readings for today: Isaiah 10-11, 2 Corinthians 12:11-21, Psalms 56, Proverbs 23:6-8

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.” (Isaiah 9:6-7)

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fatted calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11:1-9)

“In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.” (Isaiah 11:10)

Imagine living in the southern kingdom of Judah and watching in fear as the empire of Assyria rolls through Israel, destroying everything in its path. The people are scattered. The land is plundered. The leaders are killed. Nothing is left. All hope is lost. And you know you're next. It must have been a scary time. A time of national crisis. A time when the people cried out to God.

And God answers. Through the prophet Isaiah, He points His people to a glorious future. Though they walk in darkness, they will see a great light. Though they've been scattered to the four winds, they will be gathered back home. Though they have suffered and struggled, God will redeem them just as He once did when they were in Egypt. In short, God will bring salvation! Deliverance! He will usher in a new age under the reign of His Messiah.

A child shall be born. A son given. Though the House of David has been cut down to a stump, a tender shoot shall emerge. The root of Jesse will stand as a signal for all people. The Messiah will be given all authority. His rule and reign shall be marked by peace and justice and righteousness. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, giving Him wisdom, understanding, counsel, and might. He will lift up the poor and comfort the meek. His faithfulness shall know no end. He will put an end to all crying and suffering and pain. All wars and conflict will cease. Wolf and lamb. Leopard and goat. Calf and lion. Cow and bear. Toddler and cobra. All shall dwell together in peace in the Messiah's kingdom. The Lord of Hosts will do this! He will make this happen! He will bring about salvation!

What a glorious promise! I love how the people respond in Isaiah 12. “You will say in that day: “I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me. “Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.” With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: “Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that

his name is exalted. "Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be made known in all the earth. Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel." (Isaiah 12:1-6)

Here's the thing...God has fulfilled His promise! Jesus Christ is the Messiah! The child was born! The Son was given! All authority in heaven and on earth entrusted to His hands! He gathered a people to Himself! Jew and Gentile. Slave and free. Rich and poor. Male and female. He tore down the dividing walls of hostility that existed between us and made peace with us and between us by the blood of the cross. You and I no longer have to walk in darkness. We have seen the great light! We no longer have to go thirsty for we draw our water from the wells of salvation! We can live and walk in light of God's Kingdom! As we submit our lives to His Lordship, He brings peace. He brings justice. He brings reconciliation. He covers us with His righteousness. He is faithful to forgive. He is mighty to save. He grants us wisdom and knowledge and understanding. This is the promise of God fulfilled in our lives today!

So...do you sing? Do you praise? Do you look to God for your salvation? Do you give thanks to the Lord? Do you shout His name? Tell others what He has done for you?

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 12-14, 2 Corinthians 13:1-13, Psalms 57, Proverbs 23:9-11

September 13, 2019
PRIDE COMES BEFORE THE FALL

Readings for today: Isaiah 12-14, 2 Corinthians 13:1-13, Psalms 57, Proverbs 23:9-11

“How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit. Those who see you will stare at you and ponder over you: 'Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities, who did not let his prisoners go home?’” (Isaiah 14:12-17)

Pride is the deadliest of sins. Pride makes us think we are gods. The king of Babylon rose up against the people of God. He conquered the known world. He reigned supreme over all the earth. His power was unmatched. His wealth unparalleled. His held life and death in his hands. But in his pride, he aspired for more. He aspired to be a god. He demanded his people worship him. He demanded they treat him like a god. He attempted to set his throne on high. On the mountains where the gods dwelled far to the north. He wanted to make himself like the Most High. But God would not be mocked. God will tolerate no rivals. He will not share his glory with another. So he brings judgment on Babylon. He brings the king down to Sheol. He makes an example of him before the nations of the earth. The one who once made the earth to tremble and the kingdoms to quake is brought low. His power is nothing before the bared might of the Lord Almighty.

This passage also holds a deeper meaning for those who have the eyes to see. Traditionally, Christians have read these words as prophecy about the inevitable defeat of Satan. You may be familiar with the King James Version which translates verse 12 like this, “How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!” As believers in Jesus Christ, we recognize that behind every earthly tyrant stands a heavenly being of immense evil. He is the power behind every throne. He is the wellspring of every injustice. He is the cause of all suffering and pain. He is constantly at work, trying his best to tear down all things godly and good. It is tempting at times to believe he is winning. It is daunting at times when we see his handiwork on display. Sometimes, if we aren’t careful, we even begin to believe the lie that he is as powerful as God Himself.

This is where the words of Isaiah become so important. God will judge the kings and rulers and tyrants of this earth. No matter how powerful they become, he will bring them low. They will not escape God’s justice. In the same way, God has judged the devil. He has cast Lucifer out of heaven. He has taken all the glory from the Morning Star. Colossians 2 declares that on the cross, Jesus “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them...” He tore down every high thing that set itself up against the knowledge of God. He removed every foothold of the devil. He destroyed the tempter’s power. He won the victory over sin and death and evil in the world. No longer are we slaves to fear. No longer are we slaves to sin. No longer are we at the mercy of Satan. Christ has kicked down the gates of hell and set the captives free!

Do you believe this? Do you believe you have been set free? Do you believe sin no longer has a hold on you? The devil no longer holds any power over you? Do you believe death has been defeated? Do you believe the grave is not the end? Do you believe your life is hid with Christ in glory? Do you believe He holds you even now in His strong and faithful hands? Do you believe Christ is praying for you always before the throne of God above? Do you believe? And do you live in light of this belief?

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 15-18, Galatians 1, Psalms 58, Proverbs 23:12

September 14, 2019
HONOR AND SHAME

Readings for today: Isaiah 15-18, Galatians 1, Psalms 58, Proverbs 23:12

I've been reading through the Bible for over twenty years now and there's always more to learn. There's always room to grow in my understanding. When I first read through the prophetic literature of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, etc. I really struggled. I couldn't get my mind around a God who would bring such fierce judgment. Babylon. Assyria. Moab. Philistia. Syria. Cush. All face the wrath of God. Cities are laid waste. Infants killed. Women raped. Temples desecrated. Fields burned. All that's left is emptiness. A wasteland where wild goats, hyenas, and jackals roam. Where there was once communities teeming with life. The hustle and bustle of markets. Men working out in the fields. Women cooking and cleaning. Children running and playing. Now there is nothing. The sound of silence. The great empire of Babylon has fallen. The great empire of Assyria has fallen. The great nation of Moab is no more. The ports of the Philistines left desolate.

Why did all this happen? It's a very Western, very American question. Anytime tragedy strikes, we want to know why. We want to understand. We want there to be a logic to it all. We read about such destruction and we think, "How can this be right?" "What did the people do to deserve such a fate?" "Do the crimes they commit justify the punishment?" It's because we live in what cultural anthropologists call a "guilt/innocence" culture. We view things in terms of right or wrong. Black or white. One is either guilty or innocent. Everyone is responsible for their own behavior. Everyone is judged according to their own merits. We follow the rules. We are governed by laws. You either obey or disobey and then face the consequences. It is a highly individualized way to look at the world. So when we approach a text like today, we want to know what the Moabites - each individual Moabite for that matter - did to deserve their fate. We want to know what the Philistines - every Philistine man, woman, or child - did to earn judgment. And we struggle to understand how God could kill the innocent along with the guilty.

The authors of Scripture live in an "honor/shame" culture. The highest goal in this paradigm is to preserve the honor of the community. The honor of the tribe. The honor of the family. Men are "successful" insofar as they advance their family's honor in the public sphere. Women are "successful" insofar as they maintain the family honor through their modesty and purity. There is significant emphasis placed on the externals. "What do others think?" And maintaining social status as part of the group is paramount so you will have no problem surrendering your own wants and desires in favor of what benefits the larger community.

What does all this have to do with Isaiah? Listen to how he describes the fate of the pagan nations surrounding Israel... "We have heard of the pride of Moab— how proud he is!— of his arrogance, his pride, and his insolence; in his idle boasting he is not right." (Isaiah 16:6) "Wail, O gate; cry out, O city; melt in fear, O Philistia, all of you! For smoke comes out of the north, and there is no straggler in his ranks." (Isaiah 14:31) Consider these words concerning Syria, "The nations roar like the roaring of many waters, but he will rebuke them, and they will flee far away, chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind and whirling dust before the storm. At evening time, behold, terror! Before morning, they are no more! This is the portion of those who loot us, and the lot of those who plunder us." (Isaiah 17:13-14) And these concerning Cush, "All you inhabitants of the world, you who dwell on the earth, when a signal is raised on the mountains, look! When a trumpet is blown, hear... They shall all of them be left to the birds of prey of the mountains and to the beasts of the earth. And the birds of prey will summer on them, and all the beasts of the earth will winter on them." (Isaiah 18:3, 6) Why is God so angry? Why is God so bent on judgment? God is seeking to protect His honor. The nations of the earth "shame" God by refusing to acknowledge Him. And because "shame" is viewed collectively rather than individually, the entire nation suffers judgment as God "reclaims" the honor of His name. "In that day man will look to his Maker, and his eyes will look on the Holy One of Israel. He will not look to the altars, the work of his hands, and he will not look on what his own fingers have made, either the Asherim or the altars of incense." (Isaiah 17:7-8)

Understanding the "honor/shame" cultural dynamic changes the way we read Scripture. It helps us understand God's primary goal is NOT to get us to do the right thing so much as deal with our shame. To recover the honor

that was lost when Adam and Eve first sinned in the Garden, realized they were naked, and hid from God's presence. God demands our obedience not because He's after outward compliance with all the rules and regulations but because it is through our faithful obedience that we bring honor to His name. Honor to His family. Honor to our "tribe" as it were. Abraham honored God by his faith and was blessed. Moses honored God through his obedience and was blessed. David honored God through his repentance and heartfelt devotion and was blessed. Over and over again, we see this dynamic play itself out. Honor God – even amidst your sin and mistakes - and God will honor you. Shame God - even if you maintain outward purity and perfection - and you will bring shame upon yourself. Consider your own life. Do you seek to honor God in all you say and do? Do you seek to lift up His reputation? The reputation of His family? His tribe? His people?

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 19-21, Galatians 2:1-16, Psalms 59, Proverbs 23:13-14

September 15, 2019
READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Isaiah 19-21, Galatians 2:1-16, Psalms 59, Proverbs 23:13-14

Readings for TOMORROW: Isaiah 22-24, Galatians 2:17-3:9, Psalms 60, Proverbs 23:15-16

September 16, 2019
JUSTIFICATION

Readings for today: Isaiah 22-24, Galatians 2:17-3:9, Psalms 60, Proverbs 23:15-16

I have often wondered about the Pharisees. Cast as Jesus' enemies throughout the four Gospels, they have been caricatured throughout Christian history in a variety of ways. Theologians have tended to flatten them out. Make them two-dimensional. Convenient straw men to argue the superiority of the gospel. Thankfully, more recent scholarship is treating them with far more respect. We are seeking to understand them on their own terms. See the world through their eyes. Let them speak for themselves. This, in turn, is yielding deeper insights into our understanding of the four Gospels and especially the Pauline Epistles.

Many centuries ago, Martin Luther – an anti-Semite – projected his own insecurities back onto the Pharisees. Because he was consumed with how to get right before God, he assumed the Jews were as well. He perceived their faithfulness to the Law to be a form of legalism. A way of self-justification. He thought wrongly that the Jews kept the Law in order to earn God's love and favor. And this misconception persists to this day in Christian circles.

The Pharisees did not believe keeping the Law would earn them salvation. That's not what "justification" meant within their worldview. For them, justification was "about the whole business of being human; of being Jewish human; of living in a Jewish community; of living in a threatened Jewish community; of living with wisdom, integrity and hope in a threatened Jewish community; of living with zeal for Torah, the covenant and above all Israel's faithful God within a threatened Jewish community." (NT Wright) Justification, for the Pharisees, was about identity. It was not about going to heaven after one died. It was not about eternal life per se. It was wrapped up and intertwined with what it meant to be God's chosen people in a world full of pagan idolatry. Pharisees believed with all their heart that if one was faithful to Torah, God would resurrect them on the final day, thus "justifying" the way they had lived their lives.

So now imagine you are Saul the Pharisee. Advanced even among his Pharisical peers. Saul encounters the Risen Christ on the road outside of Damascus. Immediately he is confronted with the reality that if Yahweh has raised Jesus from the dead – the eschatological hope of every Pharisee - then Jesus must be the Justified One. And if Jesus is justified, then Saul is in real trouble. All his zeal is misdirected! All his ferocious loyalty to Torah is misplaced! Everything he has been taught. Everything he believes. Everything he has given his life to is upside down, turned around, and backwards! Jesus rising from the dead changes everything for Saul/Paul.

"We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified." (Galatians 2:16) Saul, now the Apostle Paul, has undergone a radical transformation. All his hopes which once rested on faithfulness to Torah are transferred to Jesus Christ. To crib the NT Wright quote above...Jesus now shows us what it means to be human. Jesus shows us what it means to be Jewish (expanded now beyond the boundaries of race to include those who are "Jewish" by faith) human. What it means to live in community as God's chosen people. What it means to live with wisdom, integrity and hope when the community is threatened as it always is by the pagan forces of this world. Jesus shows us true faithfulness to Torah, to the covenant, and above all, to Yahweh.

Justification comes then – not through faithfulness to Torah – but through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. As we place our faith in Him, we are justified by His work on our behalf. His faithfulness in place of our unfaithfulness. His sinlessness covering our sin. His righteousness exchanged for our unrighteousness. This is why Paul exclaims in one of the most beautiful passages in all the New Testament, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal. 2:20)

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 25:1-28:13, Galatians 3:10-22, Psalms 61, Proverbs 23:17-18

September 17, 2019
ON THAT DAY...

Readings for today: Isaiah 25:1-28:13, Galatians 3:10-22, Psalms 61, Proverbs 23:17-18

Some days are harder than others. Some days we wake up anxious and afraid. Some days we can barely drag ourselves out of bed. Some days we experience pain and suffering. Some days we feel hopeless and depressed. Some days everything seems to go wrong. Some days...

But there is another day coming. A day when all will be made new. Everything will be set right. Weeping and crying and suffering and pain will be no more. No more heartbreak. No more anxiety. No more fear. No more death. God Himself has guaranteed such a day! And on that day we will see His promises fulfilled!

“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.” (Isaiah 25:6-8)

“In days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit.” (Isaiah 27:6)

“In that day from the river Euphrates to the Brook of Egypt the Lord will thresh out the grain, and you will be gleaned one by one, O people of Israel. And in that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 27:12-13)

“In that day the Lord of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people, and a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment, and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.” (Isaiah 28:5-6)

God is faithful! He will never fail. No matter what difficulties you may be facing in your life right now. No matter what challenges you struggle to overcome. No matter what fears grip your soul. No matter what anxieties threaten to paralyze you. God is with you! He is working on your behalf! He is for you not against you! Look to Him! Keep your eyes on Him! Focus all your attention on Him! Trust in His love. Seek His glory. Serve Him with gladness! Praise Him even in the midst of the storm. God will keep you. God will never leave you or forsake you. He is your strength when you are weak. He is your wisdom when you are foolish. He is your confidence when you are insecure. He is your hope when you feel despair. God keeps those “in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Him, because they trust in Him. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock.” (Isaiah 26:3-4)

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 28:14-30:11, Galatians 3:23-4:31, Psalms 62, Proverbs 23:19-21

September 18, 2019
DEALING WITH DEATH

Readings for today: Isaiah 28:14-30:11, Galatians 3:23-4:31, Psalms 62, Proverbs 23:19-21

The heart of the reading for me today is Isaiah 28:15-18. Here God confronts His people with sobering words. "Because you have said, "We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement, when the overwhelming whip passes through it will not come to us, for we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter..." I think about our own culture. The covenant we too have made with death. Abortion on demand. Suicide. Euthanasia. I think about the lies we believe. Our seeming inability to sift through what's true and false. Our tendency to naively accept whatever fits our worldview rather than pursue honesty and transparency. I grieve our propensity towards violence. School shootings. Racist-motivated hate crimes. Sexual abuse. I grieve our morbid fascination with self-destruction. Legalization of marijuana and other harmful substances. Addiction to opioids and other pain-killers. All in an attempt to numb our pain. I grieve the fact that we continue to seek refuge in the lies we tell ourselves and in the falsehoods we cling to at all costs. If I were not a Christian, I would despair.

But then I read these words, "Therefore thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: 'Whoever believes will not be in haste.' And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plumb line; and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter." Then your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand..." Once again, I am overwhelmed. God does what I cannot do. God does what we cannot do. God does what no government or business or church or non-profit agency - no matter how pure and righteous their motives - can do! He annuls the covenant we made with death! He sets aside our agreement with Sheol! He lays a foundation in Zion. A sure foundation built on tested and precious stone on which we can build our lives! He doesn't ask us to rescue ourselves. He doesn't ask us to clean up our act. He doesn't expect us to find a way out of the mess we've made. He simply steps in. He restores justice. He restores righteousness. He sweeps away all the lies and falsehoods. He destroys death. He robs the grave. And He grants His people new life...abundant life...in Him!

Will we still sin? Yes. Are we still a rebellious people? Absolutely. Will we still run from God? Crawl off the altar? Try to build our lives on shifting sand? All that and more. But thankfully God is patient with us. "Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him." (Isaiah 30:18)

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 30:12-33:9, Galatians 5:1-12, Psalms 63, Proverbs 23:22

September 19, 2019
TRUE FREEDOM

Readings for today: Isaiah 30:12-33:9, Galatians 5:1-12, Psalms 63, Proverbs 23:22

Galatians is the manifesto for Christian freedom. The freedom we have in Christ. The freedom Christ won for us on the cross. Without Jesus, we are enslaved. Enslaved to our sinful desires. Enslaved to our corrupt thoughts and feelings. Enslaved to the ways of this world. Enslaved by the enemy of this world. It's why when we look at the world around us, we see such pain. It's why human beings are often so hurtful. So abusive. So evil. It's why man's inhumanity to man often knows no boundaries. Paul knew this. He had experienced this. Before Christ set him free, he was enslaved to his own passions and desires. He persecuted the church. Celebrated their pain and suffering. Rejoiced in their deaths. He relentlessly pursued them. Chased them down. Drug them from their homes and families. He was the chief of sinners. But then Christ came into his life and he was set free. So this freedom of which he speaks is not an abstract concept for him. It is something he experienced deeply, viscerally, and powerfully.

It's why he's so concerned for his Galatian friends. He is in anguish over what is happening to them. Having been set free by Christ, they are submitting themselves again to the yoke of slavery. Having begun so well in the Spirit, they are again seeking to ground their identity in something other than Jesus. Having been saved by grace through the gift of faith, they are now turning to their own work for justification. How often do we make the same mistake as Christians?

So how can we guard our hearts and minds from falling into this trap? Paul lays it out for us in the readings for today. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1) A great verse to memorize and meditate on. A great verse to remind yourself of when you start to feel the sting of temptation. A great verse to cling to when you feel trapped or defeated or depressed or anxious or afraid. You have been set free! Christ has accomplished all you need! Simply stand in this freedom. Rest in this freedom. Trust this freedom and do not return to the old ways of slavery.

"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." (Galatians 5:13) Our world doesn't understand true freedom. The freedom it offers is an unfettered freedom. A freedom without boundaries. A freedom without restraint. A freedom centered ultimately on the gratification of our own selfish desires. This is not Christian freedom, friends! It is a lie from the pit of hell! It is the path back into slavery! Christian freedom results in service to God and to one another. Christian freedom means offering our lives back to God and to His people. It is a freedom constrained by love. A freedom bounded by grace. A freedom fettered by faith in the Son of God who gave Himself up for us. This is the freedom we were called to in Christ.

And we gain this freedom as we walk by the Spirit. "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." (Galatians 5:16) As we surrender our lives to the Spirit and His sanctifying work, we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. We will stand firm and resist the yoke of slavery. We will refuse to go back to the old ways of living. "If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit." (Galatians 5:25) As we keep in step with Spirit – through daily prayer and Bible study and weekly worship with God's people – we will find our lives being transformed. Our awareness of the depth and the breadth of the freedom we have in Christ will grow. Our experience of God's presence will deepen. Our desire to love and serve both God and His people will increase. This is what Paul hopes and prays for his Galatian friends and it is my prayer for all of us as well.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 33:10-36:22, Galatians 5:13-25, Psalms 64, Proverbs 23:23

September 20, 2019
GOD IS OUR STABILITY

Readings for today: Isaiah 33:10-36:22, Galatians 5:13-25, Psalms 64, Proverbs 23:23

I get seasick. Not just a little queasy but over the top, barfing multiple times over the side, green-faced seasick. The first time I realized this I was in Maine and had signed up to go deep sea fishing off the coast. It was a stormy day. We were in a small boat. The wave action was fierce once we moved beyond the breakers. I paid quite a bit of money – for a college student - to go out on this half day trip. I was hoping to catch something big. Have a great story to tell. Alas, all I did for five hours was throw up over the side. It was honestly one of the most miserable experiences of my life. Motion sickness is caused by the disconnect between what we see with our eyes and what we feel in our inner ear. If the two don't match, you're in trouble and the symptoms won't resolve until you find stability. Make it back to shore. Put your feet on solid ground.

Today, Isaiah describes a form of spiritual motion sickness. There is a spiritual disconnect between what God's people say and what they do. They worship God with their lips but not from their hearts. "You conceive chaff; you give birth to stubble; your breath is a fire that will consume you." (Is. 33:11) The result is judgment. The result is pain. The result is suffering. They are in danger of being exiled from the Promised Land. And it's not just them. Because Israel abandoned her calling to be the light to the nations, the world has been left in darkness. No one to show the pagan nations how to worship the True and Living God. So they too come under judgment. They too experience the righteous wrath of God. There is no place that is safe. Not Egypt. Not Assyria. Not Zion. All have sinned greatly. All have abandoned true worship. All have brought shame and dishonor to God and treated Him with utter contempt. "Draw near, O nations, to hear, and give attention, O peoples...for the Lord is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host; he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter....for the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion." (Is. 34:1-2, 8) The result is chaos. Instability. The earth reels and quakes beneath their feet at the sound of God's voice.

But all hope is not lost! God Himself provides a way where there is no way. A highway for the redeemed. "A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come upon it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there." (Is. 35:8-9) It's a safe way. A secure way. A road for those who love the Lord with all their hearts, souls, and minds. It's a stable way for those who walk on it honor God for who He is. "The Lord is exalted, for he dwells on high; he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness, and he will be the stability of your times, abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge; the fear of the Lord is Zion's treasure." (Is. 33:5-6) It's a peaceful way because those who walk on it hunger and thirst after righteousness. "And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever." (Is. 32:17) It's a noble way. A way of honor and glory and respect and privilege. "He who is noble plans noble things, and on noble things he stands." (Is. 32:8) And because it is all these things and more, the redeemed rejoice when they find it. "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." (Is. 35:10)

It's a beautiful vision, is it not? Don't you find yourself longing to walk there? To experience the abundance of peace, stability, justice, righteousness, wisdom, knowledge, nobility and salvation that walking such a road promises? Doesn't your heart long to sing and rejoice and burst with everlasting joy? Believe it or not, the way is open to you even now! Jesus Christ says "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except by Me." (John 14:6) All the promises of God are hid in Christ. All the riches of God are available to those who trust Christ. All the honor and glory of God is revealed in Christ and is available to those who would place their faith in Him. Those who profess with their mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe in their hearts God raised Him from the dead are saved. And walking in salvation means you are already walking this road! So don't be afraid to claim that which is already yours in Christ Jesus! To open your hands and heart to receive from Christ all He has promised! All He has won for you through His life, death, and resurrection!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 37-38, Galatians 6, Psalms 65, Proverbs 23:24

September 21, 2019
THE FOLLY OF FALSE GODS

Readings for today: Isaiah 37-38, Galatians 6, Psalms 65, Proverbs 23:24

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

Today's reading highlights an important truth. We live in a religiously pluralistic world. A world full of all sorts of gods and goddesses. A world that is growing more religious by most measures. A world full of competing ideologies and worldviews. A world full of idols. Such has always been the case. In Hezekiah's time, every tribe had their own god. They worshiped their gods. Sacrificed to their gods. Served their gods. In return, their gods were supposed to provide for them. Protect them. Give them victory over enemies. So when a nation like Assyria invaded, the battle wasn't just between kings and armies but between the gods they served. If Assyria won, their god was more powerful. If they lost, their god was weak. "Beware lest Hezekiah mislead you by saying, "The Lord will deliver us." Has any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?" (Isaiah 36:18-20)

Assyria has established their dominance. Their god has thus far proved more powerful than the tribal gods of the other nations. But the Assyrians have misplaced their trust. They believe in idols. Gods who are not gods. Further, their victories are hollow because the nations they have conquered also worship false gods. Now things are different. Now they have come up against the one true and living God of the universe. The One who reigns in glory high above the heavens. The One who directs the affairs of all men. Hezekiah doesn't need his army. He doesn't need chariots and horses. The Lord is on his side and it is enough. "O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. Incline your ear, O Lord, and hear; open your eyes, O Lord, and see; and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. Truly, O Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire. For they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. So now, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the Lord." (Isaiah 37:16-20)

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

This was the point I was making to my own children. Our faith is not a matter of opinion. It doesn't rest on sincerity or how strongly we hold to our convictions. Our faith is real because it trusts in a God who is real. Who

is alive. Who reigns and rules from heaven even now. Who is with us. Whose Spirit dwells in the heart of every believer. Who hears our prayers. Who breaks through time and space to work miracles on our behalf. Who actually came to earth. Walked among us. Taught us the ways of His Kingdom. Who suffered and died on our behalf. Who rose again. These aren't just philosophical truths we believe but historical facts that undergird our faith in a way that sets us apart from all others.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 39:1-41:16, Ephesians 1, Psalms 66, Proverbs 23:25-28

September 22, 2019
READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Isaiah 39:1-41:16, Ephesians 1, Psalms 66, Proverbs 23:25-28

Readings for TOMORROW: Isaiah 41:17-43:13, Ephesians 2, Psalms 67, Proverbs 23:29-35

September 23, 2019
HE WILL TAKE YOU BY THE HAND...

Readings for today: Isaiah 41:17-43:13, Ephesians 2, Psalms 67, Proverbs 23:29-35

One of my favorite memories is of the first time we took our son to the beach. We were living in Mobile, AL and we took a short day trip to Dauphin Island. Josiah had just turned two and we were excited to introduce him to the Gulf of Mexico. We parked. Grabbed all our stuff. Chloe ran on ahead. Kristi and I were walking with Josiah. When we got to the beach, he started to run towards the water. I was pumped for him, thinking this was shaping up to be a great day. After getting about halfway, his little legs suddenly dug in. He stopped so fast he almost left skid marks in the sand! He stretched out his little arms and started shouting at the waves. "You stop! You stop!" They didn't obey. He got more frustrated, kept yelling, started crying, and finally sat down. His little two year old brain just couldn't make sense of the movement of the waves and he was scared. Watching all this go by, I quickly dumped all our stuff and went to Josiah's side. He looked up at me, his dad, with big eyes full of tears. Pointing to the waves, he said, "Don't stop, daddy? Don't stop?" I picked him up in my arms to calm him down. Then I set him back down on the beach, grabbed his hand, and we walked to the water together.

These passages from Isaiah are tender. The picture of God taking us by the hand and leading us, guiding us, showing us the way is sweet and special. Isaiah speaks of a God who comforts. A God who forgives. A God who gathers His people in His arms like a shepherd gathers little lambs. Let the power of these words wash over you as you reflect and pray today...

He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. (Is. 40:11)

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. (Is. 40:28-29)

Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Is. 41:10)

For I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, Fear not, I am the one who helps you...I am the one who helps you, declares the Lord; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel. (Is. 41:13-14)

When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them. (Is. 41:17)

I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations... (Is. 42:6)

And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them. (Is. 42:16)

"But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you." (Isaiah 43:1-2)

"Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life. Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you." (Isaiah 43:4-5)

There is a lot in life that makes us afraid. Crisis. Uncertainty. Tragic experiences. Illness. Disease. Job loss. Aging. Growing up. These things are like waves crashing on the shores of our lives. We cannot stop them anymore than Josiah could stop the wave action in the gulf. What we can do is let God take us by the hand. Lead us to the water's edge. And help us find safety, security, and peace in His presence. When we do, we discover the very things we fear become opportunities for significant spiritual growth. Our greatest trials become the source of our greatest victories. Our greatest struggles become our greatest strengths. Playing in the surf of life is where the action is and with God at our side, we have nothing to fear. Whatever you may be facing today, know God is with you! He is at your side! If you reach out, He will take you by the hand!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 43:14-45:10, Ephesians 3, Psalms 68:1-18, Proverbs 24:1-2

September 24, 2019
CREATED. CALLED. REDEEMED.

Readings for today: Isaiah 43:14-45:10, Ephesians 3, Psalms 68:1-18, Proverbs 24:1-2

I am beginning to prepare my heart for Africa. These trips fill my soul in ways I cannot explain. Probably because I'm way outside my comfort zone when I go, I find God meeting me there in new and fresh ways. Now the travel is not easy. It's a long 30+ hour trip from Denver to Yabelo. It involves multiple flights and a four hour car ride. One of the ways I pass the time on the plane is to look at the map that charts our progress as we go. I watch as we make our way from D.C. to Addis Ababa. We pass over Dublin, Rome, Cairo, Khartoum, Juba, and Entebbe. As we draw near, I look at the window to the east and I see names like Bahir Dar, Asmara, Djibouti, Jeddah, and Mogadishu. (There's not much to the west...just a whole lot of desert.) We fly over Europe and Egypt and Sudan before finally landing in Ethiopia. I've fallen love with this part of the world. God has given me a heart for the people here. I have friends in some of these places. In others, they are still strangers though I hope one day to visit and get to know them. There is much darkness in this part of the world. A lot of idolatry. The worship of false gods. Isaiah's words today are not so strange when you've seen some of the things I've seen. "The carpenter stretches a line; he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it." (Isaiah 44:13-15) You see, I've met these carpenters. I've seen the craftsmen hard at work fashioning their idols. I've watched them bow down before them and it shatters my heart. I've wept over the lost. I've held those who are sick. I've prayed with those who are dying. I've seen the desperately poor. And I've dedicated my life to bringing them the hope of the gospel.

"But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1) God created me for such a time as this. God has fashioned me for this purpose. He redeemed me so many years on the campus of the University of Colorado in Boulder so that I might fulfill His great plan to bring the gospel to the nations. This is why He called me by name. To set me apart. To serve His purposes. To take all that I am and all that I have and use me for His glory. I have no identity of my own. I have nothing to call my own. This is not just something I do in my spare time or support with the leftovers of my life. This is literally the reason I exist. "Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you; you are my servant...I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you." (Isaiah 44:21-22) Now you may be tempted to believe dismiss this as my calling. As something that is unique to Doug Resler but nothing could be further from the truth. Every single person who has called on the name of the Lord has been saved and set apart for this glorious purpose. To bring the gospel to the nations! I love how the Apostle Paul describes it in Ephesians 3:8-10, "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." All of us have been created for this purpose. Called to this purpose. Redeemed for this purpose. To share with an unbelieving world the unsearchable riches of Christ! Starting at home and extending to the ends of the earth. Every resource you have been given. Every gift you have received. Every talent you have developed. Every life experience you have gone through, God has carefully orchestrated that you might serve His divine purposes. The reality is you don't have to go to Africa to see idolatry. You don't have to go to the Middle East to see the worship of false gods. Our nation and our neighborhoods are just as dark as places like Juba and Khartoum and Entebbe. The people we live among need the gospel just as desperately as the people I will have the opportunity to serve at the end of the month in Yabelo. When it comes to the Kingdom of God. When it comes to eternal life. We hold no advantage. We have no privilege of position. We will not be "boarding" first or get any special treatment. God has given us a truly great commission. To share the good news of the gospel. To go and tell the nations of all He has done! To sing a new song! To lift up praise to our King! To place our lives in His hands for Him to use as He sees fit according to His divine plan.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 45:11-48:11, Ephesians 4:1-16, Psalms 68:19-35, Proverbs 24:3-4

September 25, 2019
TROPHIES OF GRACE

Readings for today: Isaiah 45:11-48:11, Ephesians 4:1-16, Psalms 68:19-35, Proverbs 24:3-4

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” (Ephesians 2:4-7)

When I was young, I had a bookshelf on which I displayed all my trophies. I had a letter jacket on which I displayed all my high school athletic accomplishments. I framed academic certificates for making the honor roll. I wore my Boy Scout uniform with pride because of the many patches and badges it displayed, each representing some kind of achievement including my Eagle. Now I am older but my tendency to put my achievements on display has not diminished. I sit in my office and to my right on the wall are the degrees I’ve earned as well as my certificate of ordination and the senior preaching award I won at Princeton. All of us have a tendency to glory in our achievements and there’s nothing wrong with being proud of the hard work you’ve put in or the accolades you’ve received along the way.

At the same time, we must also recognize success is fleeting. My old trophies are gathering dust in my parent’s basement somewhere. My letter jacket and Boy Scout uniform hang in a dark corner of my closet. I can’t for the life of me find a single honor roll certificate and I barely glance at the degrees on my wall. These things come and go. They are like the grass that withers or the flower that fades. Even if I were to spend my whole life conquering one mountain after another, eventually my strength will fail. Eventually there will be no more mountains to climb. No more prizes to win. What then?

Thankfully, life is more than what I achieve. Life is more than what I earn. Life is more than what I accomplish. Life. True life. Eternal life is a gift from God. It is unearned. It is unmerited. It is undeserved. It is a gift and from this gift flows grace. “But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” (Eph. 4:7) The reality is each of us is stillborn spiritually. We are conceived in iniquity and born into sin. We are trapped. Imprisoned. Enslaved. We have no hope of escape. Only Christ can save us. Only Christ can rescue us. Only Christ can raise us up and make us alive again. “Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.” (Eph. 4:8-10) Thankfully, Christ is willing to leave heaven. Come to earth. Become obedient unto death. And descend into hell. Christ kicks in the door of the devil’s domain. He assaults Satan’s fortress in order to set us free. He then leads us in a victorious procession back to heaven where we live for all eternity as trophies of His grace.

Do you realize God’s intent is to show you off for all eternity? Do you realize His greatest joy, His greatest delight comes in saving you? Do you understand that God has raised you up and seated you at His right hand so that in the ages to come all will see the immeasurable riches of Christ in you? Forget the plastic trophies we grasp so tightly! Forget the moth-eaten letter jackets and Boy Scout uniforms! Forget the degrees that fade! My life is a trophy of grace! My life is exhibit one of God’s mercy! My salvation is God’s achievement that will go on display for all eternity...for all to see...all for His glory!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 48:12-50:11, Ephesians 4:17-32, Psalms 69:1-18, Proverbs 24:5-6

September 26, 2019
GOD IS OUR HELP

Readings for today: Isaiah 48:12-50:11, Ephesians 4:17-32, Psalms 69:1-18, Proverbs 24:5-6

You have a choice. Either carry your god or let God carry you. Either you load yourself down with the idols of your lives. Idols that are false. Dead. Cannot save. Or you let God bear you up on eagle's wings. I love how Isaiah 46 puts it, "Bel bows down; Nebo stoops; their idols are on beasts and livestock; these things you carry are borne as burdens on weary beasts. They stoop; they bow down together; they cannot save the burden, but themselves go into captivity. "Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save." (Isaiah 46:1-4) The picture Isaiah paints here is of the foreign nations carrying their gods around from place to place. They put their gods on carts borne by beasts of burden. They are heavy loads. The oxen have to strain to keep going. And all for naught as they are dead and empty. So the result is defeat. Exile. Captivity. Contrast this with the Living God of Israel. No idol can depict him. No statue or totem to carry. So strange was Israel's faith that many of their neighbors considered them atheists! Because they didn't appear to even have a god! And yet their God is real. Alive. Active. Bears them up from birth even to their old age. They didn't make him, He made them. They didn't bear him, He bore them. They didn't carry him, He carries them. They didn't save him, He saves them.

You and I are faced with this same choice everyday. Sure, our idols are not as obvious. At least that's what we tell ourselves. We don't have statues or totems or anything like that. Instead, we have bank accounts. Homes. Careers. Relationships. These are the things we place our trust in rather than the Living God. We place our faith in ourselves. We worship ourselves. All our energy and resources are directed towards making sure our needs, our wants, our desires are fulfilled. We are told we deserve this. We are told we've earned this. We're told we want this. That we would be nothing without it. Life is not worth living unless you have it all. Such lies place burdens on our shoulders too heavy to carry. They wear us down. They sap us of our strength. All of us know the rat race we're on is killing us. We cannot maintain the pace. So what's the answer?

Turn to God. Let Him bear the burden of your life. Trust the One who shaped and formed you in your mother's womb. Trust the One who gave you breath and life at your birth. Trust the One who endowed you with all gifts and talents and abilities you have. Trust the One who knows every hair on your head. If you'll let Him, He will lift you up. If you'll lean on Him, He will give you strength. If you trust Him, He will never let you down. He has made you. He has borne you. He has carried you. He will save you. Listen again to His promise..."Listen to me, O Jacob, and Israel, whom I called! I am he; I am the first, and I am the last. My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I call to them, they stand forth together. Assemble, all of you, and listen! Who among them has declared these things? The Lord loves him...I, even I, have spoken and called him; I have brought him, and he will prosper in his way. Draw near to me, hear this: from the beginning I have not spoken in secret, from the time it came to be I have been there. And now the Lord God has sent me, and his Spirit. Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the Lord your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go. Oh that you had paid attention to my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea; your offspring would have been like the sand, and your descendants like its grains; their name would never be cut off or destroyed from before me." (Isaiah 48:12-19)

What does such a life look like in real-time? It looks like my friend Nankpak. He is from Nigeria. He is a young man around 24 years of age. He exemplifies what Isaiah is talking about. He has suffered unimaginable tragedy in his life. Boko Haram killed his parents and siblings and tried to take his life. He still bears the scars from the machete wounds on his back. He has a bullet in his side. But God saved him. God protected him. God delivered him. One would think such a man would be bitter and angry. One would think such a man might seek vengeance against those who killed his family. Not Nankpak. The gospel has set him free. And he believes God has a special plan for his life. He believes he's been called to fight the rise of infectious disease in his country. He has already achieved a bachelor's degree in microbiology. He will serve the next few years as a teacher in his

country as part of a compulsory service program run by the government for those who graduate college. Then he plans on going back to school for a master's degree. Because his father was a pastor, Nakpak is also considering ministry or perhaps combining the two in some way in the future. His is one story among many that inspires because he shows me what it means to place my trust in God.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 51-53, Ephesians 5, Psalms 69:19-36, Proverbs 24:7

September 27, 2019
SUFFERING SERVANT

Readings for today: Isaiah 51-53, Ephesians 5, Psalms 69:19-36, Proverbs 24:7

One of the great blessings of my life has been to meet saints who have suffered for the cause of Christ. One of those is Bishop John Rucyahana of Rwanda. Bishop John gave up a thriving ministry in Uganda where he was relatively safe to enter into the horror of the aftermath of the genocide in his home country. He writes and speaks powerfully on the subject as he seeks to answer the question, “Where was God as over one million people were being slaughtered?” His answer is powerful because it is born out of his personal experience as well as his willingness to sit in the ashes with so many and listen to their stories. “Where was God when a million innocent people were being butchered? Where was God when priests and pastors helped massacre the people in their churches? I’ll tell you where God was. He was alongside the victims lying on the cold stone floor of the cathedral. He was comforting a dying child. He was crying at the altar. But He was also saving lives. Many were saved by miracles. God does not flee when evil takes over a nation...God is the giver of eternal life, and He can bring great good out of any situation. He raises the dead; He can also raise the broken. He can restore their hearts and minds and lift their spirits to renewed life. In my country God is doing this today by the thousands. There is so much pain here, so many real tears, and so much guilt that our ministry is like preaching hope from the top of a pile of bones. From atop a mountain of mutilated bodies, we are stretching a hand upward to proclaim a message of transformation and recovery.” (The Bishop of Rwanda)

Another saint I’ve had the privilege of spending time with is Pastor Chun Ki-Won. Pastor Chun is the founder of a ministry called Durihana in South Korea which operates both as an accredited international school as well as a base for rescue operations for those enslaved in North Korea. Pastor Chun risks his life on a regular basis to save those who are trapped and suffering. He has been nicknamed the “Asian Schindler” for his work at saving literally hundreds of refugees over the last few decades. A few years ago, I had the privilege of visiting the Durihana school and spending time with some of the refugees there. It was heartbreakingly to listen to them tell of the starvation, physical and sexual abuse, rape, and torture they endured. These young women had suffered on a level I simply could not fathom and yet their faith remained strong. Only Jesus could provide such grace. Only Jesus could give them such strength. How can I be so sure? Because Jesus knows the depths of human suffering. He experienced the absolute worst this world has to offer. He knows evil intimately and through his death defeats it once and for all. Listen to how the ancient prophet Isaiah describes the suffering of Jesus, some hundreds of years before His death and resurrection.

“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed...He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth...Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand...Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.” (Isaiah 53:3-5, 7, 10, 12)

The same God who bore the sins of many. The same God who makes intercession for the transgressors. The same God who loved His enemies so much He died for them is the same God who is alive and active in Rwanda. Bringing about reconciliation through forgiveness. Alive and active in North Korea. Bringing healing to broken bodies and restoration to broken souls. Preaching hope from atop a pile of His own bones. From atop His own mutilated body, He stretches a hand upward to proclaim a message of transformation and grace. It’s truly incredible and it is available to all who would place their trust in Him. Friends, if God can bring about reconciliation between the victims and perpetrators of genocide in Rwanda can He not accomplish the same in our lives as well? If God can bring healing to the refugees of North Korea can he not do the same for us? What is required? Repentance. Confession. Truth-telling. Courage. Faith. Humility. Most of all, a deep and abiding and enduring trust in the power of the gospel.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 54:1-57:14, Ephesians 6, Psalms 70, Proverbs 24:8

September 28, 2019
SPIRITUAL BATTLE

Readings for today: Isaiah 54:1-57:14, Ephesians 6, Psalms 70, Proverbs 24:8

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:10-12)

We are in the middle of our Celebrating Missions Weekend and have the privilege of hosting Pastor Chun Ki-Won and several North Korean refugees. Pastor Chun is known as the “Asian Schindler” and has been involved in running an Underground Railroad from North Korea through China to Southeast Asia in order to repatriate North Korean refugees into South Korean society. It is a ministry fraught with danger. There is a price on his head in North Korea. He has spent many months in a Chinese prison. He certainly is a target for the evil cosmic powers that reign over the present darkness of this world. Over the last two decades he has rescued over 1200 refugees, many of them coming out of the sex trade. He rescues them. Educates them. Helps them find a new life of freedom in South Korean society.

Pastor Chun lives these verses from Ephesians. He risks his life regularly to save those who are imprisoned. He is under spiritual attack constantly. The North Korean media spreads lies about him, accusing him of being a human trafficker himself. The Chinese have threatened his life on any number of occasions. He is contending against the spiritual forces of evil as he seeks to bring light to one of the darkest places on earth. As I listen to him, I am struck by his great faithfulness. He is a man who walks by faith and not by sight. He puts on the full armor of God and has been protected – often miraculously - from capture and imprisonment. The stories he shares are quite frankly astounding and convicting.

The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was to convince the world he doesn’t exist. You and I live in a world that ignores the spiritual realm. We ignore the spiritual forces of evil arrayed against us in the heavenly places. We pretend these things don’t exist. We arrogantly assume we are beyond such things. We believe such things are for the superstitious. The primitive. The ignorant. But the Bible clearly acknowledges the spiritual realm. The Bible clearly declares that there is a great enemy of our souls and he is actively seeking to rob, kill, and destroy. And we must take him seriously.

Every day is a spiritual battle. From the moment we wake up to the moment we go to bed, we are actively being attacked and influenced by our enemy. He wants to discourage us. He wants to sideline us. He wants to tempt us to compromise our deeply held convictions. More than anything else, he wants us to live selfish lives. Lives wrapped around our own well-being. Lives focused on getting as much as we can for as long as we can to make life as comfortable as possible. Frankly, he wants us to pursue the American Dream rather than God’s dream and when we do, we suffer. The world suffers. And the enemy gains a foothold.

Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Resist the temptation to live for yourself. Resist the temptation to live a life of achievement and accumulation. Resist the temptation to hoard God’s blessings. Instead, put on the whole armor of God. Resist the devil that he may flee. Engage the battle. Wrestle with the spiritual forces of evil. Don’t give in! Don’t sell yourself so cheaply! Don’t compromise with the enemy! Don’t give him an inch in your life! Live for Christ. Dedicate your whole life to Christ. Seek Christ with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. As you do, God will do great things through you for His Kingdom.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 57:15-59:21, Philippians 1:1-26, Psalms 71, Proverbs 24:9-10

September 29, 2019
READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Isaiah 57:15-59:21, Philippians 1:1-26, Psalms 71, Proverbs 24:9-10

Readings for TOMORROW: Isaiah 60:1-62:5, Philippians 1:27-2:18, Psalms 72, Proverbs 24:11-12

September 30, 2019
WHAT THIS WORLD NEEDS...

Readings for today: Isaiah 60:1-62:5, Philippians 1:27-2:18, Psalms 72, Proverbs 24:11-12

Now more than ever, our world needs Jesus. In the midst of the death, violence, suffering, corruption, greed, avarice, poverty, and pain; our world needs the people of God to shine like light in the darkness. Bringing hope to the hopeless. Help to the helpless. Comfort to the afflicted. Deliverance for the captives. Good news to the anxious and afraid. If we want to know why the world is continuing to descend into chaos, we need to look in the mirror. God has no plan B. His plan from the beginning of time has been to use His people - those called by His name and bearing His image - to fill the earth with His glory.

“The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married.” (Isaiah 62:2-4)

This is God’s vision for the world. And the vehicle He chooses to accomplish His vision is His church. His people. His family. Those He adopts as His sons and daughters. The Bible declares that all those who believe in Jesus Christ are given the right to be called children of God. With that right comes the responsibility to live as God’s children. To let our manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ... (Phil. 1:27) As we stand firm in one spirit. As we strive side by side for the faith of the gospel. As we seek the same mind that is ours in Christ Jesus. As we walk humbly together before the world, seeking to serve rather than be served. As we work out our salvation with fear and trembling. God promises that we will “be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,” (Phil. 2:15) He promises to use us to accomplish His redemptive and salvific purposes in this world.

Such has always been the call for the people of God. Consider the words of the ancient prophet Isaiah...

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.” (Isaiah 60:1-3)

“Violence shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders; you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise. The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give you light; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended. Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I might be glorified.” (Isaiah 60:18-21)

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified. They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.” (Isaiah 61:1-4)

Living as God’s children requires intentionality. It requires a radical reorientation of all that we love. It requires us to put God first. To worship Him alone. To earnestly seek His face. To order our life and our priorities in such a way that we make His glory our goal. It requires us to live as He lived. To love as He loved. To serve as He

served. It requires us to come before Him daily in prayer. Daily in confession of sin. Daily in reading His Word. Daily in worshipping Him from our hearts. It requires us to engage with His people. Worshipping alongside the other members of our spiritual family. Tearing down the dividing walls of hostility that so often divide us. It requires the regular practice of forgiveness and grace. Mercy and compassion. Courage and boldness to proclaim the truth in love. It isn't easy but it is what God requires of us.

So how are you doing? How are you really doing? When you look at your life, what do you see? When you look at your schedule, where is your time with God? When you look at your resources, how much of it goes to the work of the Kingdom? When you consider your priorities, where is God on your list? When you look at the world around you, what needs are you specifically equipped by God to meet? Stop waiting. Stop complaining. Stop blaming. Get to work as God's chosen people, bringing life and light and hope and joy in the name of Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 62:6-65:25, Philippians 2:19-3:3, Psalms 73, Proverbs 24:13-14