

BIBLE IN A YEAR

BIBLE, FOLLOWING JESUS, DISCIPLESHIP

2019

STUDY AND COMMENTARY

BY

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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OCTOBER

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October 1, 2019
MIND OF CHRIST

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

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...” (Phil. 2:5) This is what’s missing from the church today. The mind of Christ. Could you imagine what would happen if the people of God who profess to believe in the authority of the Word of God simply put these words from Philippians 2 into practice? If we truly did nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit? If we truly counted others more significant than ourselves? If we truly grasped the mind of Christ that is ours already through faith in Jesus?

Sadly, we do not take God at His Word. If we are honest, most of what we do is for selfish purposes. Self-protection. Self-provision. Selfish ambition. We do not believe others are more significant than ourselves because we are swimming in a culture that is addicted to self-promotion. Why is social media so popular? Because we can share our highlight reel with the world. We can be the hero of our own story. We can be center of attention. Why is social media so depressing? Because of the competition it invites as we scroll through our feeds and compare ourselves to our friends. Even those who trade in “authenticity” do so in a curated way. Meaning that even as they share their struggles and frustrations and brokenness, it is done in such a way as to draw attention to themselves.

Paul calls us to a different way. The way of Christ. And this way requires humility. It requires us to check all our selfish desires at the door. The pattern Christ sets for us is very specific and very concrete. Christ did not consider his status as God something to be held onto. Christ willingly relinquished all His divine authority and rights and prerogatives. Christ emptied Himself of His divine glory and power in order to become a human being. There is no greater example of humility than the infinite God of the universe limiting Himself by taking on finite human flesh. And not just any flesh but the flesh of a servant. And there is no greater act of humility than this same God becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. The humiliation of Jesus stands in direct contrast to the prideful self-absorption of our culture. And it is something all who claim to follow Jesus must embrace.

Paul embraced the way of Jesus. This letter comes at the end of Paul’s life. He’s in prison in Rome awaiting his trial and probably execution. As he reflects back on all he has experienced, what is his great desire? Christ. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

“To live is Christ and to die is gain.”

“Whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Christ.”

“I count everything as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.”

Even my sufferings are nothing compared to what I have gained in Christ.

“I have no righteousness to call my own but only that which comes through faith in Christ.”

All my strivings cease as I “press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

I want to know nothing else but “Christ and the power of His resurrection.”

Does this mean we should abandon everything we have and go live as hermits in the wilderness? No. Some have actually made this attempt but even there pride found them. Even alone in the wilderness, they could not escape themselves. The only answer, friends, is to intentionally and relentlessly set your mind and heart on Christ. Through daily prayer and meditation on Scripture. Weekly corporate worship with your church family. Active participation in some kind of small group where you can share openly, honestly, and vulnerably and be held accountable for your spiritual growth. Finding a place to serve Christ through the local church. These are the means of grace God uses to shape our hearts and minds over a lifetime.

The Mind of Christ is not abstract, friends. It doesn't magically appear. It takes concrete form as we walk in relationship with one another and with God. Humility is something that must be practiced because the inertia of our lives is always towards self. Our hearts are inwardly inclined. We navel gaze as a general rule. To get from here to there requires us to die to self on a regular basis. Crucify the sinful desires of our flesh. Empty ourselves of all our foolish pride, ambition, and conceit. Only as we believe the Jesus Truth and follow the Jesus Way will we obtain the Jesus Life.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 66, Philippians 3:4-21, Psalms 74, Proverbs 24:15-16

October 2, 2019
HUMILITY

Readings for today: Isaiah 66, Philippians 3:4-21, Psalms 74, Proverbs 24:15-16

“Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” (Philippians 3:4-11)

What defines you? What are you most proud of in your life? Is it your job? Your family? Your personality? Your enneagram type? Is it your accomplishments? Your achievements? The trophies you keep on the shelf? Is it your memories? Your past glories? Is it your race? Your culture? Your sexuality? What defines you? What shapes you? What makes you who you are? What's at the core of your identity?

The Apostle Paul had all kinds of reasons to boast. All kinds of reasons to be confident in himself. He was the Jew of Jews. Circumcised on the eighth day. A man who could trace his lineage all the way back to Benjamin. Trained as a Pharisee under the tutelage of one of the greatest teachers of his age. Unsurpassed in zeal for his faith, he persecuted Christians. A strict observer of Torah, Paul was blameless according to the Law. Add to this the fact that he was a Roman citizen. A successful businessman. A rising star in Jerusalem. And yet all that he counts as loss for the sake of knowing Christ. He counts all those things as rubbish. Garbage. Things not worth comparing to the surpassing grace of knowing Christ and being found in Him. His righteousness is like a filthy rag compared to the righteousness he receives from Christ. His power is nothing compared to the power of Christ's resurrection. In short, Paul willingly and joyfully relinquishes everything he has and all that he is in exchange for Christ.

What about you? What about me? I lived the American Dream. Loving family. Middle class lifestyle. Good student. Varsity athlete. Eagle Scout. College graduate. Youngest hospital manager in history. Ivy League education. Best preacher of my class. Successful pastor. Adjunct professor. International speaker.

Denominational leader. Husband to my best friend. Father of four great kids. I am blessed beyond all measure and all of it is simply not worth comparing to the love I have for Christ. To the love He has for me. All of it is rubbish. Garbage. Filthy rags in comparison to the righteousness Christ won for me on the Cross. I would trade all of it in an instant if I might share in His sufferings and gain the power of His resurrection in my life.

Christ gave up everything for me. How can I not do the same? And lest you think I lead a charmed life, there is a darker side to my story as well. I grew up in an alcoholic home. Endured the uncertainty of job losses and business failures. Sometimes wondered where my next meal would come from. I was lonely. Anxious. Afraid most of the time. I had no spiritual center. I flunked out of college. Drank my way into oblivion. Barely made ends meet when I first got married. Lived on public assistance for most of the early years of my marriage. Struggled through grad school. Failed as a church planter. Let me wife and kids down on more than one occasion. I have not always been a good husband and my anger issues made me difficult to live with at times. And still Christ loves me. Still Christ gave Himself for me. Still Christ laid His life down for me.

The core of my identity is Christ. I am a wretched sinner but Christ is a great Savior. I bring nothing to the table that He has not already given me. I offer nothing back to Him of worth or value. I simply bring myself – warts and all – and it is enough. It is all Christ wants. It is all Christ desires. It is why He came. To claim me as His own forever. To capture my heart once and for all. To deliver me from the prison of my sin and suffering and self-affliction. To offer me His life in place of my despair. I am humbled when I consider all He has done for me. I am filled with gratitude and thankfulness. My heart overflows with joy. Thanks be to Christ for His inexpressible gift!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 1:1-2:30, Philippians 4, Psalms 75, Proverbs 24:17-20

October 3, 2019
THE PATHOS OF GOD

Readings for today: Jeremiah 1:1-2:30, Philippians 4, Psalms 75, Proverbs 24:17-20

Jeremiah is a hard book to read. Especially if one gets in touch with the pain present throughout. Not only Jeremiah's pain as he watches his people and his nation struggle and suffer and eventually be destroyed. But God's pain as well as His people betray Him by chasing after other gods. So intertwined is the pain of God with His prophet that it is often hard to know who's speaking. For example, Jeremiah 4:19 says, "My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent, for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war." (Jeremiah 4:19) Traditionally, these words have been ascribed to Jeremiah himself because we simply cannot fathom God saying such things. However, when one looks closely at the text, it is clear God is speaking in verse 18 ("Your ways and your deeds have brought this upon you. This is your doom, and it is bitter; it has reached your very heart.") and in verse 22 ("For my people are foolish; they know me not; they are stupid children; they have no understanding. They are 'wise'—in doing evil! But how to do good they know not.") Is it possible that we are so uncomfortable with the idea that God might feel pain that we automatically bracket this reading out of the text?

We're going to see this dynamic pop up over and over again throughout this book and it forces us to come to grips with how we see and understand God. Classically, the question goes to the "impassibility" of God. The idea that God doesn't have "passions" or "pathos" which has to do with suffering. Some have interpreted this to mean God doesn't have emotions but that's clearly not true. God expresses a whole range of emotions all throughout the Scriptures. More specifically this idea has to do with the suffering of God. Can God suffer? Does such suffering suggest a change in God? Does it threaten the immutability of His nature and character? Historically, the answer has been "yes" which then forces us to find other explanations for what we read in texts like the one before us today. But what if God suffers? What if God chooses – in His freedom - to be the kind of God who moves towards suffering? Who embraces suffering? Who welcomes suffering without it changing who He is? Is this not the heart of the gospel? Is this not part of the mystery of the Incarnation? Eternal God choosing to take on human flesh? With all its weaknesses and struggles and hardships? Is this not the heart of the passion of our Christ? God suffering with us and for us even to the point of death?

It seems to me that we lose nothing by embracing the pathos of God if we understand God has embraced such pathos according to His own will and good pleasure. Certainly, such suffering is not forced on God. It doesn't take God by surprise. It doesn't enact a change on God's experience. God is beyond all these things. He truly is immutable or unchanging. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. There is no shadow or turning in Him. But at the same time, God has revealed Himself in a particular, one might even argue, peculiar kind of way. He is a God who embraces a broken creation. A God who covenants with a broken people. A God who is steadfast and faithful and loyal and true even in the face of evil. He is a God who likens His relationship with His people to a marriage and the faithlessness of His people to adultery. He frequently uses the language of betrayal and heartache and pain to express His dismay over the sinful choices His people make. No one forces God to remain faithful. No one makes God forgive. No outside force can drive God to do anything He Himself has not already chosen to do in complete freedom. Which makes passages like the one we read today and others like it throughout the book of Jeremiah so intriguing.

What if God is in anguish over us? What if being in relationship with us breaks God's heart? What if God's choice to love us from before the foundations of the earth involved Him choosing unimaginable suffering? Would this change how you relate to Him? Change how you see Him? Change how you experience Him? Change how you love Him?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 2:31-4:18, Colossians 1:1-17, Psalms 76, Proverbs 24:21-22

October 4, 2019
PRAYER

Readings for today: Jeremiah 2:31-4:18, Colossians 1:1-17, Psalms 76, Proverbs 24:21-22

If God were to answer all your prayers today, how many people would be impacted? How many communities would be restored? How many lost people would be saved? How many loved ones would find comfort? How many churches would be revived? These are sobering questions to ponder because the tendency in prayer is focus solely on ourselves. The temptation is to navel-gaze and come to God over and over again with our lists of wants and needs and desires. It takes great discipline to pray faithfully and regularly for others. Family. Friends. Co-workers. Brothers and sisters in Christ. Even our enemies. That's why I love these words from Colossians...

“And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.” (Colossians 1:9-12)

I love Paul's heart for others. He prays fervently for those under his spiritual care. He prays without ceasing for those who are lost and wandering in darkness and despair. He lifts up even his enemies before the Lord and asks God to convict and judge them in righteousness according to His perfect will.

I also love how Paul prays for others. I love the content of his prayers. Of all the things he could have lifted up in prayer – their pain, suffering, heartbreak, poverty, etc. - Paul prays for their spiritual well-being. He prayed for them to be filled with the knowledge of God's will. God's wisdom. God's insight and understanding. He prays they will - in the midst of all they're going through - remain faithful to Jesus in their manner of life. He prays for their fruitfulness as believers. He prays for them to be strengthened with God's power. To endure. To persevere. To thrive. He prays for them to find joy in the midst of their trials and tribulations. And he prays finally for them to be filled with gratitude for all God has done.

I find myself deeply convicted by Paul's prayer life. The way he prays. The people he prays for. The heart of his prayers. And I find myself longing to do the same for the people God has placed in my life. To pray for my wife and children. Pray for my extended family and friends. Pray for my church family and denomination. Pray for the community where I live and my country. Pray for the world and the brothers and sisters I know who are engaged in God's great work. Praying even for my enemies. And as I pray, I find myself focusing less on the immediate needs – though I lift those to the Lord as well - but more for God to fill them with His strength, wisdom, knowledge, and joy. For as God fills us with these things. Really as God fills us with His presence. We find the courage and strength to face every circumstance. We find the peace that passes all understanding that transcends every tragedy. We find the hope that endures in the face of every despair.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 4:19-6:15, Colossians 1:18-29, Psalms 77, Proverbs 24:23-25

October 5, 2019
THE PREEMINENCE OF CHRIST

Readings for today: Jeremiah 4:19-6:15, Colossians 1:18-29, Psalms 77, Proverbs 24:23-25

I am starting to prepare for my trip to Ethiopia at the end of the month. One of the things I do when I am over there is teach on the character and nature of God. Specifically, I spend a lot of time teaching on the doctrine of the Trinity which declares that the One True God exists eternally as Three Persons. Distinct yet undivided. Different but not separate. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...all are God. But the Father is not the Son. The Son is not the Spirit. And the Spirit is not the Father. Though they are diverse in their personalities and roles, they all share in the same essence or being. It's a paradox to be sure and a stumbling block to faith for many. It is also notoriously difficult to translate into local tribal dialects!

The term "Trinity" was coined by a 2nd century African theologian named Tertullian. Considered by many to be the "Father of Western Theology", Tertullian attempted to put into human words what is ultimately a divine mystery. From the opening pages of Scripture, the One God reveals Himself as a plurality. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...and the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters...then God said..." The Apostle John affirms this central truth in the opening verses of his Gospel. "In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." And then comes these words today from the Apostle Paul, "Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister." (Colossians 1:15-23)

Why is all this important? In the consumeristic and materialistic mindset that marks American Christianity, what is lost is our wonder and awe at what God has done in Jesus Christ. The magnitude of the miracle of God becoming one of us is something that should bring us to our knees. It should cause our stomachs to flop and our hearts to skip a beat. We should all fall face down on the floor in worship and adoration of the Resurrected Christ. And yet, we can barely get to church on Sunday morning. We can barely bring ourselves to pray or read God's Word on a regular basis. Even during the Christmas season, we spend most of Advent prepping for Santa Claus, decorating the house, and going on spending sprees we cannot afford.

Jesus is the very image of the invisible God. He is the perfect representation of God's being. In Jesus, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. He is preeminent over all creation. Jesus is the Word of God Incarnate. The God of the universe taking on human flesh and entering into our world. Jesus is before all things. He created all things. He sustains all things. He reconciles all things. And He will one day glorify all things, whether on earth or in heaven. It is utterly amazing and beyond words that this God...this Jesus...would bend the heavens to come down and become one of us. Be born of a virgin for us. Suffer hardship and pain for us. Shed His own blood for us. Die a humiliating death on the cross for us. Spend three days in the grave for us. Descend into hell itself for us. And rise again from the grave for us. But this is what our God did. All the while remaining God.

So I find myself often asking...why is this not enough? Why do I need to add more? Why do I feel the pressure to spend so much time and energy on things that do not carry eternal weight? Why do I not spend more time at the manger? More time at the foot of the cross? More time worshiping at the empty tomb? More time in silent awe and wonder at what the Triune God has done in giving His only Begotten Son for the sake of the world?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 6:16-8:7, Colossians 2:8-23, Psalms 78:1-31, Proverbs 24:26

October 6, 2019
READINGS FOR TODAY

Readings for Today: Jeremiah 6:16-8:7, Colossians 2:8-23, Psalms 78:1-31, Proverbs 24:26

Readings for Tomorrow: Jeremiah 8:8-9:26, Colossians 3:1-17, Psalms 78:32-55, Proverbs 24:27

October 7, 2019
THE GRIEF OF GOD

Readings for today: Jeremiah 8:8-9:26, Colossians 3:1-17, Psalms 78:32-55, Proverbs 24:27

It's a striking conversation. God processing His grief as He considers the plight of His people. For many years, commentators have ascribed these words to Jeremiah. Following a theological tradition that holds to the "impassibility" of God or the idea that God cannot suffer, they shift the voice to Jeremiah even though there is no such indication in the text. Thankfully, the doctrine of God's impassibility has been challenged in recent decades as scholars take a more honest look at passages like the one we read in Jeremiah today. Listen again to the words and imagine God having this conversation with Himself...(Jeremiah 8:22-9:3)

"My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick within me. Behold, the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and breadth of the land: "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?" God hears the cries of His people as they beg Him for mercy. Their suffering has caused them to question His faithfulness.

"Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols?" It is not God who is faithless but God's people who have abandoned Him.

"The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." The people of God cry out again for salvation. They are suffering terribly.

"For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded; I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me." God suffers with His people. He shares their pain. God freely and willingly moves towards them as they struggle and sits with them in the ashes and dust as they grieve.

"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored?" Once again, the rhetorical questions rise. If God is with His people as they suffer, why are they not healed? Why are they not saved?

"Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people! Oh that I had in the desert a travelers' lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them! For they are all adulterers, a company of treacherous men. They bend their tongue like a bow; falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, declares the Lord." God will not save for His people persist in their rebellion. They refuse to repent and return to Him. God is distraught over the sins of His people.

This passage from Jeremiah 8 and 9 is one of the most poignant in all of Scripture. Again, most English translations put these words in Jeremiah's mouth. Primarily because of how uncomfortable we are with God experiencing deep, heartbreakng grief. As Western Christians we are heavily influenced by Platonic thought whether we realize it or not. We tend to believe God is fundamentally distant. Fundamentally different. Fundamentally beyond all human experience, including emotions. We believe He is untouchable. Unmovable. Unchangeable. We associate emotions with feelings of change. Instability. Unpredictability. And these things cannot be true of God...right?

But what if we were willing to embrace a different understanding of emotions? A deeper understanding? Again, it is without question that God experiences emotions. Love. Anger. Frustration. Joy. We read about them over and over again and they are not simply anthropomorphisms. (A way for God to express Himself in human terms we can understand.) What if our understanding of God could be expanded to include the full range of emotions? What if us having emotions is part of being made in God's image? What if our "emotionalism", which breeds the feelings of instability and unpredictability, is actually a result of sin and a sign of brokenness? What if God, because He remains untouched by sin, is able to experience the full range of emotions without being driven by them?

This brings us back to the passage cited above. God is expressing the deepest, most heartbreakng grief possible. "My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick within me." God is experiencing an incredible sense of loss. His people have betrayed Him. They have abandoned Him. And then they turn around and blame Him. "Behold, the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and breadth of the land: "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?" They refuse to bow the knee. Refuse to repent. Refuse to humble themselves before Him. In fact, they do the opposite. They brazenly continue in sin. "Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols?" This is a stiff-necked people. A foolish people. A rebellious people. They take their relationship with God for granted. They are entitled. They are spoiled. They assume God will come to their rescue despite their unwillingness to walk in His ways.

The perspective shifts back to God. "For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded; I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored?" "Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" Again, one pictures deep, heavy sobs. God weeping a flood of tears. God experiencing unimaginable pain. Because He has freely joined Himself in an unbreakable covenant with His people, their wounds become His wounds. Their pain becomes His pain. Their heartbreak becomes His heartbreak. Things get so bad, God wishes He could leave. Abandon them to their fate. Leave the Temple in Jerusalem and return to the wilderness. To the time when He tabernacled with them on the Exodus journey. "Oh that I had in the desert a travelers' lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them! For they are all adulterers, a company of treacherous men. They bend their tongue like a bow; falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, declares the Lord." But the Tabernacle is gone. There is no lodging place in the desert God can run to. He is stuck. He is committed. He will endure. This is the great faithfulness of our God! It is costly. It is hard. It is painful. But it remains forever true.

God is being faithful to Himself here. Faithful to the promise He has made. To be our God, come hell or high water. This was the covenant He first made with Abraham in Genesis 15 and later sealed through the death and resurrection of His Beloved Son Jesus Christ. His steadfast love establishes the fundamental reality of our lives. The bedrock on which we can build our lives. Without fear. Without shame. Without worry that somehow, somehow there will come a day when God will finally lose patience and abandon us. God will not leave us or forsake us for in doing so He would be unfaithful to Himself. Let this truth be your firm foundation today, friends!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 10:11, Colossians 3:18-4:18, Psalms 78:56-72, Proverbs 24:28-29

October 8, 2019
WORDS MATTER

Readings for today: Jeremiah 10:11, Colossians 3:18-4:18, Psalms 78:56-72, Proverbs 24:28-29

How do you engage the world around you? What words do you use when you speak? When you tweet? When you send email? How do the people around you experience you? How do they receive you? What would they say about you if asked? Are you known as a kind person? A gentle person? A positive person? If someone were to record you today as you went about your life, what would they discover? What kind of wake do you leave? Do you build others up or tear them down? Are you quick to speak and slow to listen? Do you find yourself getting easily riled up? Going on the attack? Taking things personally and getting defensive? Lashing out in anger and frustration?

Listen to what Paul says today to his Colossians friends. “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” (Colossians 4:6)

Convicting, isn’t it? Especially if you the kind of person who binges on cable news or scrolls endlessly through your twitter feed. As a pastor, I purposefully try to enter these spaces. I purposefully try to engage in a healthy, positive way on social media. I follow people from all across the political and theological and social spectrum. I try to stay up on the news of the day by browsing several different platforms. I have to tell you it isn’t easy. My heart gets beat up along the way. My soul takes a pounding from all the anger and hate and vitriol that is out there. We don’t seem to know how to talk to each other anymore. We apply litmus tests to each other based on the company we keep. I think of the blowback television personality Ellen DeGeneres received Sunday evening after being “caught” watching a football game with former President George W. Bush. People from her own tribe questioning her “liberal credibility” because she ate popcorn at a sporting event next to someone from the other side of the political aisle. I think of the blowback a pastoral colleague and friend received for meeting with someone from a different theological tribe than our own. Rumors. Gossip. Innuendo. Christians bearing false witness about this man because he dared to meet with someone outside our stream. It’s getting out of hand. And real people are suffering real consequences as a result. Jobs are being lost. Livelihoods destroyed. Businesses are being shut down. All because we can’t seem to follow Paul’s advice. To speak with grace. To season our words with salt so that we might preserve and add flavor to our conversations. To treat everyone with the dignity and worth they deserve as people made in the image of God.

Why is this so hard for us? I believe it has to do with fear. We fear what we don’t understand. We fear those who are different. We fear change and uncertainty and our world is full of that right now. Not only do we find ourselves in the midst of massive cultural upheaval but the pace at which it’s happening is scary. One day vaping is considered a safe alternative to cigarettes. The next we are performing funerals for young people who are dying from it. One day we affirm surgical transitions for young people still struggling through puberty and the next these same people are asking for de-transitioning surgeries to return to their biological gender. One day we legalize marijuana and the next we are finding out the negative impacts on the adolescent brain. Our “ready, fire, aim” approach is not working. Our inability to sit down and reason together is costing us dearly. Our unwillingness to hear the other side or listen to different opinions or consider alternative evidence is harmful and abusive.

So what can we do? Each of us is given a sphere of influence. For some of us it is our home. Our family. Our circle of friends. For others it is the team we lead at work or the business we run. For others it is our congregation. For still others it is the constituency we serve. Whatever authority God has given you, use it to build up. Whatever power God has given you, use it for the good of those around you. Whatever influence God has given you, use it to bless others even if they don’t agree or belong to your tribe. Speak words of grace. Words of life. Words of hope into those around you. For this is what God has done for us. Remember, none of us agreed with God. None of us stood on His side. None of us came from His tribe. Still He came to us. Still He laid down His life for us. Still He loved us so much He gave His only Begotten Son. Believe in Him! Follow Him! Speak in His name!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 12:1-14:10, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-2:8, Psalms 79, Proverbs 24:30-34

October 9, 2019
GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Readings for today: Jeremiah 12:1-14:10, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-2:8, Psalms 79, Proverbs 24:30-34

What did you expect when you first came to faith in Jesus Christ? Some expect all their problems to go away. Some expect all their suffering will end. Some have no expectations that anything will change other than their eternal destiny. Some expect to see miracles of healing and provision in their life. Some expect to receive a new circle of friendships. Some expect to live with an intimate sense of God's abiding presence. Others expect the church to become their family. What were your expectations? Were they met? Were they fulfilled? I expect not.

One of the real problems in the American church is we expect so little. We expect so little from God. We expect God to bless all our plans. We expect God to sprinkle fairy dust on all our problems. We expect God to indulge our sin. We expect God to be "on-call" when we have an emergency. We expect so little from the church. We expect the church to be a safe place for us but we're unwilling to help make it safe for others. We expect the church to meet our needs but rarely raise a hand to help out. We expect the church to produce programming that makes us or our children feel good and we jump ship the moment another church down provides something more attractive or exciting. We expect the church to be family but we are not willing to make the sacrifices necessary in our own lives to build the deep relationships required. We expect so little from ourselves. We do not humble ourselves before God and seek to follow His ways. We do not plant ourselves deep in His Word and in prayer. We do not pursue holiness and righteousness. We do not offer forgiveness and grace nor are we willing to do the hard work of reconciliation with those we've wounded or who've wounded us. No wonder the church in America experiences so little of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

Listen to how Paul describes the early believers in Thessaloniki..."For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that God has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia." (1 Thessalonians 1:4-7) The early church held great expectations. They expected God to work miracles on their behalf for His glory and the expansion of His Kingdom on earth. They expected much from each other as they built diverse worshipping communities across racial, cultural, and generational barriers. They expected much from themselves as they pursued lives of personal holiness before the Lord. And God added to their number daily those being saved. God used them to conquer an empire not through violence or the exercise of political power but through self-sacrificing love. The men and women of the early church laid down their lives for the sake of the gospel. For the sake of their church family. For the sake of one another and their example has inspired millions through the ages to do the same.

What are your expectations as a Christian? What do you expect from yourself? Are you intentionally growing a deep, **intimate** relationship with Christ? Are you seeking to faithfully walk in His ways? To live a life of holiness and righteousness before Him? What do you expect from your church family? How are you helping to build her up? How are you helping people get connected with each other? How are you plugging in and serving and giving and helping your local church thrive? What do you expect from God? Does He exist to serve you and your needs or do you exist to serve Him and His Kingdom? God has great expectations for His people. He had made us in His image. Redeemed us through the death of His own Son. And He now sends us out into the world to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 14:11-16:15, 1 Thessalonians 2:9-3:13, Psalms 80, Proverbs 25:1-5

October 10, 2019
MYTH BUSTING

Readings for today: Jeremiah 14:11-16:15, 1 Thessalonians 2:9-3:13, Psalms 80, Proverbs 25:1-5

There is a dangerous myth many Christians believe. If we are walking faithfully with the Lord. If we are obeying His commands and living according to His Word. If we are praying and worshipping and serving Him then we will not face hardship. We will not struggle or suffer or endure any pain. Life will be good and blessed and we will be happy. Fundamentally, we believe if we do our part, God is bound to do His and our lives should reflect His favor.

But then we read a passage like this one from Jeremiah today...“Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me...Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts. I did not sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?” (Jeremiah 15:10, 16-18) Jeremiah is angry with God. He’s bitter and frustrated. He’s fulfilled the call of God. He’s been faithful. He took God’s Word and proclaimed it to the people at great personal cost. They beat and persecute him. They spit on him and mock him. He has no friends. No family. He sits alone. Who knows how long he has suffered? We only know he’s finally reached a breaking point. He is in anguish. He is in pain. He is depressed. He is discouraged. He accuses of God of being deceitful. Lying to him. Pulling a bait and switch.

It’s real. It’s raw. It’s honest. I’ve been there. I remember well the 19 months we spent in Wisconsin. We were fully convinced God called us to go there to plant a church. We were excited. We were passionate. We couldn’t wait to get started. God had given us a vision. He had given us plenty of resources. We were confident we would do great things for Jesus. Within a few months, our dream became a nightmare. For the first time in my life, I became a man of “strife and contention” to those I worked for. I felt cursed. Afflicted. Unjustly accused. I didn’t handle it well. I complained. I grew frustrated. I got angry with God. I felt like He had let me down. I felt like He had broken faith with me. After all, I had given up a thriving ministry and uprooted my family and poured my heart and soul into this new work. All to no avail. I ended up broken. Battered. Bruised and contemplated throwing in the towel on ministry altogether. My wife was in an even darker place. It was the most painful time of our lives.

In the midst of our heartache, I cried out to God and this is what He said. In essence, “Should you accept good from me and not hardship? Did you think this life I called you to was only going to be up and to the right? One success after another? What if it is my will to crush you? To break your pride? To make you suffer so you learn to depend on Me? Am I not enough for you?” It was sobering and convicting and strangely...comforting. Even in our darkest moments, God was there. Though His presence was a refiner’s fire, it felt good. The kind of good one feels after a hard workout or when one has overcome something incredibly difficult. You may still bear the scars but they become badges of honor along the way.

Such was true for Jeremiah as well. Listen to the Lord’s response to him in the midst of his pain. “If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the Lord. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.” (Jeremiah 15:19-21) The call on Jeremiah’s life would be a hard one. God is relentless. And He would use Jeremiah as a hammer to break his people’s pride. He would be ostracized. Isolated. Hated. Persecuted. He would suffer and struggle and endure tremendous pain. But through it all, God would be with him. God would give him the strength he needed to bear up under the burden.

Only you know the burdens you carry in life. Only you know the source of those burdens. Sometime we suffer because of our sin. The choices we make lead us down dark paths. We have to own those choices. Take responsibility. Repent and turn back to the Lord. Sometimes the Lord leads us into suffering. To refine us. Test us. Break sinful patterns of pride and self-sufficiency in our lives. In those times, we must submit. Accept. Surrender to His sovereign will and trust even the hard times serve His purposes in our lives.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 6:16-18:23, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-5:3, Psalms 81, Proverbs 25:6-8

October 11, 2019
FOLLOW YOUR HEART?

Readings for today: Jeremiah 6:16-18:23, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-5:3, Psalms 81, Proverbs 25:6-8

"Just follow your heart." It makes for a great Disney tune but it's not a great philosophy for life. Unfortunately, our culture promotes this lie relentlessly. Everyone from Silicon Valley icons like Steve Jobs to Hollywood entertainers like Rihanna to academic luminaries/political activists like Robert Kennedy Jr. to sports stars like Mia Hamm all share the same advice. "Follow your heart." "Trust your gut." "Believe in yourself." "Do what your heart tells you and your mind will follow." It sounds really good, doesn't it? Almost biblical. It taps into our innermost longings. It affirms our secret desires. It seems like the only path to true happiness and joy.

Sadly, the opposite seems to be true. Steve Jobs followed his heart and became an international celebrity and Silicon Valley legend but lost his family in the process. Rihanna followed her heart and became an international pop star/businesswoman but suffered tremendously in an abusive relationship with fellow singer Chris Brown. Robert Kennedy Jr. followed his heart and found great success in law and academics but has been married three times along the way. Mia Hamm put US Women's Soccer on the map but it also cost her a marriage along the way. None of these folks are necessarily bad people. They are human just like the rest of us. We all make mistakes. We are all prone to failure. Shoot, I could give you several examples from my own life as well where "following my heart" has led me into a ditch.

Why? Because "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9) These ancient words still ring true today. We simply cannot trust our hearts. We cannot trust our feelings. We cannot trust our emotions. They change with the wind. They are influenced far too easily. The endorphin rush they create overrides our rationality. Eats away at our commitments. We find ourselves doing the very things we hate and not doing the things we love. We find ourselves wrapped up in all kinds of "wrong" when we know there's a better, truer path to "right." It's craziness. Literal insanity to trust in an organ that is so fickle and yet we seem to fall into this same trap over and over again.

So what's the answer? We must turn to the Lord. The One who made us and shaped us and formed us and fashioned us. The One who called us and claimed us as His own from eternity. The One who first established us and gave our lives purpose and meaning and showed us the way to true fulfillment. The One who would not abandon us in our sin but came to us. Suffered for us. Died for us. All to set us free so that we might live again. "I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds." (Jeremiah 17:10)

Here is the fundamental question we have to answer on a daily, even hourly basis. Do we trust the One who created us and loved us? Or do we trust ourselves? Do we trust in the One whose love is always steadfast, loyal and true? Or do we trust our fickle, human hearts? Do we trust the One who never makes mistakes? Never falls down on the job? Never fails to deliver on His promises? Or do we trust the guy or gal in the mirror with the incredible spotty track record? The great news of the gospel is that we have a Good Father in heaven who delights in giving good gifts to His children. We have a gracious Savior who gave His own life to deliver us from slavery to sin. We have the Holy Spirit living inside us who promises to guide and direct and show us the way to true joy and everlasting peace.

Follow your heart? I'd rather follow the Lord.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 19-21, 1 Thessalonians 5:4-28, Psalms 82, Proverbs 25:9-10

October 12, 2019
AT WAR WITH GOD

Readings for today: Jeremiah 19-21, 1 Thessalonians 5:4-28, Psalms 82, Proverbs 25:9-10

Today's reading makes me so thankful for Jesus. Jesus died in my place. He took the full wrath and fury my sin had earned on Himself. He endured the suffering. The pain. The horrors of hell that I may live. Without Christ, I would be lost. Rightfully condemned. At the mercy of God's judgment. Just like the people of Israel.

"I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and strong arm, in anger and in fury and in great wrath." (Jeremiah 21:5) These might be some of the scariest words in all the Bible. Can you imagine what it must be like to be at war with God? To be in complete rebellion against your Creator? Not just ignoring His will but consciously, intentionally, even eagerly seeking to disobey? The sons of Josiah knew full well what they were doing. The priests and prophets of Jeremiah's time were fully aware of their actions. The people of God who lived in the cities and villages were not ignorant of the commandments of God. They simply chose to ignore them. They simply chose to reject them. And the consequences of their actions are devastating.

Israel will go into exile in Babylon. They will lose their land. They will lose their homes. Their Temple will be raised to the ground. Their glory pounded into dust. Even worse, their God was now fighting on the side of the Chaldeans! No longer their Protector. No longer their Warrior. He was for them is now against them. Who can resist His might? "I will turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands and with which you are fighting against the king of Babylon and against the Chaldeans who are besieging you outside the walls...I will strike down the inhabitants of this city, both man and beast. They shall die of a great pestilence...I will give Zedekiah king of Judah and his servants and the people in this city who survive the pestilence, sword, and famine into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and into the hand of their enemies, into the hand of those who seek their lives. He shall strike them down with the edge of the sword. He shall not pity them or spare them or have compassion." (Jeremiah 21:4, 6-7) It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a Holy God!

And yet, even amidst this national catastrophe, Jeremiah will sound a note of hope. Admittedly I am stealing a bit from tomorrow's reading - ha! - but there will come a day when the sins of Israel have been paid and the Lord will visit His people once more. "I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord. "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'" (Jeremiah 23:3-6) As is so often the case in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament; it is always darkest before the dawn. The promise of a Messiah rises out of the ashes of their sin like a phoenix spreading its wings. David will not be abandoned. A righteous Branch shall come from his line. A king who will reign with justice and righteousness and wisdom. One who will restore the fortunes of God's people. One who will defeat their great enemy once and for all so they may finally dwell secure. He will even have a name...**צְדָקָה יְהוָה**... "The Lord is our righteousness."

Jesus is our righteousness, friends. God made Him who knew no sin to actually become sin on our behalf. To bear the full weight of the world's sin. Past. Present. Future. He took all my sin. All my brokenness. All my fears. He took all my rebellion. All my rejection. All my disdain. He took all my selfishness. All my greed. All my lusts. And He nailed them to the cross. By His wounds, I am healed. By His brokenness, I am made whole. By His chains, I am set free. By His death, I am given new life.

The reality is my flesh is at war with God. The desires of my heart are bent towards evil. My thoughts and attitudes and actions are corrupt. And God is at war with me. His Spirit waging a battle for my heart. He has invaded my life. Invaded the innermost depths of my being in order to cleanse me. Purify me. Refine me. He is a consuming fire. He will not rest until my life reflects His glory. And the more I surrender. The more I submit. The more I cooperate with the work of the Spirit, the more I will experience the freedom Christ promises. This is no easy task. The flesh and its desires must be crucified. Put to death. There can be no safe harbor for them in our souls. We must allow the Spirit to “save to the uttermost.” We must open ourselves up fully and completely to His work. Only then will we be truly set free.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 22:1-23:20, 2 Thessalonians 1, Psalms 83, Proverbs 25:11-14

October 13, 2019
READINGS FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Jeremiah 22:1-23:20, 2 Thessalonians 1, Psalms 83, Proverbs 25:11-14

Readings for today: Jeremiah 23:21-25:38, 2 Thessalonians 2, Psalms 84, Proverbs 25:15

October 14, 2019
FALSE PROPHETS

Readings for today: Jeremiah 23:21-25:38, 2 Thessalonians 2, Psalms 84, Proverbs 25:15

We live in a world of false prophets. Prophets, priests, pastors who use the Word of God to manipulate and control. To prop up unrighteous systems and support evil deeds. The examples are legion. Priests using their position of power to abuse the most vulnerable. Pastors using their influence to accumulate massive amounts of wealth at the expense of their congregations. Still other Christian leaders using their social media platforms to promote hatred against men and women of different faiths. Entire denominations aligning their theology with one party's political platform or another. I have listened to pastors use the image of the heavenly Jerusalem to promote the building of a wall on our southern border. I have heard leaders in my old denomination fiercely defend abortion on demand as righteous and good. I have experienced the merging of pagan rituals with the precious sacraments of the Christian faith. The words of the ancient prophet Jeremiah hold true now more than ever...

"I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their deeds." (Jeremiah 23:21-22)

"I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart, who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal?" (Jeremiah 23:25-27)

"Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, declares the Lord, who steal my words from one another. Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the Lord, who use their tongues and declare, 'declares the Lord.' Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, declares the Lord, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them. So they do not profit this people at all, declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 23:30-32)

Friends, God will not be mocked. He will not allow His name to be profaned. He will not stand idly by while people warp and twist and pervert His Word. Do we really think God is not listening? Do we really think God doesn't see our sin? Do we really think God will not rise up and act to defend His own honor and glory? We are fools as Jeremiah points out. "Am I a God at hand, declares the Lord, and not a God far away? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 23:23-24) God hears every word we say. He sees every tweet. He knows every Facebook post. He looks down from heaven and his anger grows as He watches those who claim to be shepherds for His people embrace unrighteousness. His wrath is kindled towards those who use His name to acquire wealth and power and privilege at the expense of those we are called to serve. The poor. The lost. The lonely. The least of these. He will not stand idly by as false prophets share their dreams and cast their visions and spread their lies.

'The Lord will roar from on high, and from his holy habitation utter his voice; he will roar mightily against his fold, and shout, like those who tread grapes, against all the inhabitants of the earth. The clamor will resound to the ends of the earth, for the Lord has an indictment against the nations; he is entering into judgment with all flesh, and the wicked he will put to the sword, declares the Lord...Wail, you shepherds, and cry out, and roll in ashes, you lords of the flock, for the days of your slaughter and dispersion have come, and you shall fall like a choice vessel. No refuge will remain for the shepherds, nor escape for the lords of the flock. A voice—the cry of the shepherds, and the wail of the lords of the flock! For the Lord is laying waste their pasture, and the peaceful folds are devastated because of the fierce anger of the Lord. Like a lion he has left his lair, for their land has

become a waste because of the sword of the oppressor, and because of his fierce anger." (Jeremiah 25:30-31, 34-38)

Make no mistake, friends. The Lord is coming in righteous judgment against the false prophets we see on television or hear opining on cable news or follow on Twitter. He will make them drink the cup of His wrath. He will bring them down just as surely as they lifted themselves up. And it would be easy for us to rejoice in their fall. Until we start to examine our hearts. We too must acknowledge where we have sinned. We too must humble ourselves under God's mighty hand. We too must confess the manifold ways we have allowed the corrupt values of this world to infiltrate our hearts. Influence our decisions. Shape the way we see the world. Like the false prophets of old, we must heed His call to return to His Word in faithfulness. We must let His love replace our hate. Let His kindness replace our anger. His joy replace our sorrow. His peace replace our anxiety. Above all, we must cling to His truth above our own. We must reject the lies and falsehoods and never give fear a foothold lest we compromise our faith. The grass will wither. The flower will fade. The glory of the nations will come and go. Only God's Word stands forever.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 26-27, 2 Thessalonians 3, Psalms 85, Proverbs 25:16

October 15, 2019
WITH GOD'S HELP

Readings for today: Jeremiah 26-27, 2 Thessalonians 3, Psalms 85, Proverbs 25:16

“To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power...” (2 Thessalonians 1:11)

“Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.” (2 Thessalonians 3:1-5)

A common misconception in the Christian life is that while God performs the act of salvation, the rest of life is up to us. We raise our hands and come forward as a response to the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration in our hearts but then leave the sanctuary with this inner resolve to live by our own will-power. How many sermons have we heard over the years that could double as secular motivational talks? How many Bible studies turn into self-help sessions with a little Jesus thrown in? How many conferences and retreats have we attended where the main message was simply work harder? Do more? Be better for Jesus? I cannot tell you how many times I have picked up a book, downloaded a podcast, or attended a conference hoping to hear the gospel only to be told overtly or covertly that the quality of my life really depends on me. My self-discipline. My ability to resist temptation. The intentional way I live my life.

The Bible is clear. We simply do not have the power to live the Christian life. We do not have the will or the discipline to make it happen. Left to our own devices, we will struggle. Left to our own resources, we will fall. Trusting in our own strength, we will fail. Living the Christian life is not a matter of learning some new techniques. It's not a matter of turning over a new leaf. It is about transformation. Total-life transformation from the inside out and it is the work of God.

In the verses above, it's instructive to note both how Paul prays for his Thessalonians friends and how he asks for prayer. Everything he asks for comes from God. Not a single thing is rooted in the human heart. He prays God will make them worthy of His calling. Essentially, he is praying for God's Spirit to so root and ground them in the righteousness of Christ that every facet of their lives - home, community, work, school, etc. - would reflect His glory. He prays their lives might become a living reflection of the reality God has already brought about through their salvation in Jesus Christ. He asks that the Word of the Lord would go ahead of them and that they would be delivered from evil along the way. Finally, he prays that the Lord would direct their hearts to His great love and the steadfastness of Christ. Friends, Christ is our only hope in this life and the next. Only those who are in Christ will be saved. Only those who are in Christ will be delivered. In Christ we are the very righteousness of God. Therefore those called by Christ are constantly being formed and re-formed into His image.

This involves human activity of course. A change in human behavior. But even that is not accomplished through our own willpower alone. Another thing Paul prays for is for God to fulfill their every resolve for good. Each and every day, we are faced with a fundamental choice. Will I live for God or will I live for me? Will I live selflessly or selfishly? Will I seek to honor God or will I gratify the desires of the sinful nature? This fundamental choice works itself out in lots of different situations in every facet of our lives. It pops up in every conversation. Every task assigned to us. Every chore we perform. Every interaction we have with another divine image-bearer who crosses our path. However it manifests itself, the fundamental choice is always the same. Will we do good or evil? And because we are predisposed through our sinful nature to do evil, we need God's help to do good.

One final thing Paul prays for is the power to perform every work of faith. Once God has called us and set us apart for Himself. And once He has reoriented our desires away from evil and towards the good. The final piece we need is the power to actually perform the action. We need the power to actually take the next step. To confirm our calling by acting on our resolve to walk by faith and not by sight. Only by tapping the limitless power of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit will we ever find the strength to live for Christ. And this is why we must spend so much time with Him. Learning to hear His voice. Seek His wisdom. Surrender to His strength. This is why prayer and meditation on Scripture is absolutely vital to the Christian life. It's why weekly worship with a local body of believers is essential for every single Christian. It is through these ordinary "means of grace" that God makes us worthy of His calling. Fulfills our every resolve for good. And gives us the strength to perform every work of faith.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 28-29, 1 Timothy 1, Psalms 86, Proverbs 25:17

October 16, 2019
FOR I KNOW THE PLANS I HAVE FOR YOU....

Readings for today: Jeremiah 28-29, 1 Timothy 1, Psalms 86, Proverbs 25:17

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

If only I had a dollar for every time I’ve heard this verse quoted at a graduation, wedding, seen it on a t-shirt or coffee mug. It has become cliche. A platitude we like to use to support the fulfillment of our dreams and desires. It’s why proof-texting is a dangerous business.

Jeremiah 29:11 is a verse embedded in a story. A tragic story. The story of Israel’s exile. They have lost their home. They have been forcibly removed. (Think Trail of Tears or something like it...) Their leaders have been tortured and put to death. All of their cultural icons - including the Temple of God itself - have been raised to the ground. In short, their collective identity as the people of God has suffered a massive hit, leaving behind an emotional and spiritual crater that will not be easily filled. Especially not as they rebuild in a foreign land.

Think about the collective shock we all felt on 9/11 when the planes hit both towers and the Pentagon. Think about the grief we all felt. The rage. The anger. Now multiply that many times over. Imagine terrorists taking over our country. Capturing our leaders. Torturing them on national television and executing them. Imagine them systematically destroying every monument we’ve ever built. Washington. Lincoln. Jefferson memorials all destroyed. Arlington. Mount Vernon. Monticello. All burned to the ground. Imagine them trying to erase “America” from the face of the earth. This is what the Israelites experienced and as they begin to settle into captivity. Into slavery. Into their new lives as strangers and foreigners in a new land and then they receive this letter from Jeremiah.

“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.” (Jeremiah 29:5-6) In essence, live your lives. Do what you’ve always done. Don’t spend your days looking back at where you’ve been but forward to the future.

“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (Jeremiah 29:7) Pray for your enemies. For those who destroyed your way of life. For those who killed your loved ones. Conquered your land. Burned your cities. Destroyed your nation. And don’t just pray. Actively seek to bless them. Bless their city. Bless their communities. Be salt and light in this new place.

“For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.” (Jeremiah 29:10) Settle in for the long haul. This is not going to quick or easy. You will be in exile for generations. Your children and children’s children will be born here. You may actually never return home yourselves.

It is only AFTER all these difficult things have been said that Jeremiah pens the words we love to quote so much, “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.” (Jeremiah 29:11-14)

Friends, the hard truth we don't like to think about very much is that God's plans for us often include exile. Suffering. Hardship. Pain. God uses things as tools to knock off the rough edges of our lives. To refine out all the impurity. To strain out all the sin. His "good" plans for us that give us a future and a hope include taking us through the fire so that we can be made pure and holy as He is pure and holy. Seeking God with all our hearts means trusting Him with the direction of our lives...even when that direction doesn't appear to be comfortable or safe. It means letting Him lead and guide us into dark valleys where all we have is His presence. It means trusting the Good Shepherd to eventually find us green pastures and still waters though the journey may be long and arduous to get from here to there. This is what Jeremiah is trying to communicate to his people as they start their heartbreakingly, gut-wrenching exile in Babylon. God is with them. He has not forgotten them. He will eventually redeem them. This is their hope! This is their future! And though they themselves may not actually get there, they can trust God will bring their descendants home.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 30:1-31:26, 1 Timothy 2, Psalms 87, Proverbs 25:18-19

October 17, 2019
POLITICAL PRAYER

Readings for today: Jeremiah 30:1-31:26, 1 Timothy 2, Psalms 87, Proverbs 25:18-19

“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:1-4)

Do you believe God wants to save Donald Trump? Do you believe God wants to save Hilary Clinton? Do you believe God wants to save Xi Jinping or Kim Jong-Un? Do you believe God wants to save your senator or representative? What about the man or woman serving in your state assembly? Town Council? School board?

Politics has a way of bringing out the worst in us. Our Twitter feeds are full of condemnations of those with whom we disagree. We live in a “call-out” culture where self-proclaimed watchdogs take advantage of every opportunity to go on the attack. We assassinate character. We impugn motives. We assume the absolute worst about people. All sides of the political equation are guilty. And all they are doing is playing to the masses. There’s a reason most of the cable news shows have devolved into opinion segments. We don’t really want hard news. We want to live in an echo chamber where our own views are expressed without being challenged. It’s comforting to us to know there are others who hold our opinions. It’s like a warm blanket that makes us feel safe.

Now imagine you live in Timothy’s world. A young pastor serving a new church in a city called Ephesus where the introduction of the Christian faith caused a riot. Upended the economy. Made you very unpopular with the locals. Talk about a tough job. It would be easy to retreat. To pull back. To go into hiding. It would be easy to attack your enemies. To work against the authorities. To subvert the empire. It would be tempting to call down fire on those who are actively persecuting you. Curse the Romans who are seeking to abuse, torture, and kill many in your congregation. But then you get this letter from your spiritual mentor. Paul encourages you to go the other way. To pray for all people. Especially kings and those in authority. He challenges Timothy to pray in faith for the salvation of all who would believe. Jews and Gentiles. Romans and barbarians. Slave and free. It’s a bold call and it sounds so like Jesus.

Imagine what would happen if we spent as much time praying as we did scrolling through social media? Imagine what would happen if we prayed for our leaders and those in authority rather than constantly subject them to our withering attacks? Imagine if it didn’t matter what political party was in power or who lived in the White House or who donned the robes of the Supreme Court? Imagine if those in power received the full prayer support of Christians all over the country? Imagine if instead of complaining about their decision-making, we prayed for wisdom? Imagine if instead of attacking them over their arrogance and pride, we prayed for humility? Imagine if instead of killing them over the mistakes they inevitably make, we prayed for conviction? And imagine if - after praying - we then re-engaged the public sphere and lovingly confronted our leaders with the truth of the gospel?

The call to prayer is not a call to passivity. It’s not a call to inaction. It’s not a retreat. It’s a way for us to get our own hearts right before the Lord. To check our motives and make sure they align with Jesus. It’s a way for us to surrender any of our own personal or political agendas to the Lord and let Him guide and direct our steps. The kingdoms of this world rise and fall. They come and go. At their very

best, they are still full of corruption and injustice and oppression. Such is true for all human systems. We battle principalities and powers. Spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. The only weapons we have are not of the flesh. The weapons of prayer and God's Word are the only things mighty enough to tear down every stronghold and every high thing that sets itself up against the knowledge of God.

Friends, if you find yourself discouraged by the actions or inactions of our current political leaders... pray. If you find yourself frustrated by the overheated rhetoric that passes for political discourse these days...pray. If you find yourself growing angry or feel the rage building at the injustices perpetrated by any local, state, or national administrations...pray. Cry out to God! Call on Him for salvation! And then fight not just for the soul of our nation but for the souls of those who lead our nation.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 31:27-32:44, 1 Timothy 3, Psalms 88, Proverbs 25:20-22

October 18, 2019
NEW COVENANT

Readings for today: Jeremiah 31:27-32:44, 1 Timothy 3, Psalms 88, Proverbs 25:20-22

This morning I went on a run with a friend and we talked about the blessings of adversity. The lessons we learn only through hardship and suffering. The ways God reveals Himself to us when we are down and out and have nowhere to go. The humility we receive when our strength and wisdom has failed and we've come to the end of ourselves. Most of all, we talked about what it's like to be fired in the furnace of affliction and come out refined as pure gold. This is God's promise repeated throughout the Scriptures and we see it again today in our reading from Jeremiah.

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

(Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Think about everything Israel has endured. First, consider her sin. Her unfaithfulness. Her spiritual adultery. Her rebellion against God's Law. Israel was full of evil towards the end. She looked no different than any other nation on earth. She was full of injustice and greed and oppression. She worshipped many gods. Built many temples. Visited many shrines. Rather than serve as a light to the Gentiles, she adopted their pagan customs and ways. The result was judgment. God poured out the cup of His wrath upon them. He tread the winepress of His fury and paid them back in full for their sins. He sent them into exile. He destroyed everything they held dear. It was brutal and terrifying.

Jeremiah has watched all this go by. Set apart by birth from God to serve as His prophet, Jeremiah has the unenviable task of speaking God's truth to a people who will not listen in a time of great cultural upheaval. He is called to pronounce judgment. He is called to speak hard truth. He is called to challenge the rulers of his people who are leading everyone astray. He is beaten. He is imprisoned. He is dragged before the authorities on more than one occasion. His life is hard. He grieves. He weeps. He suffers. And just when you think it can get any worse...a fresh Word appears.

God will not forget His people. He will not abandon them forever. He will make a new covenant with them. It will replace the covenant He first made with Israel when they came up out of Egypt. It will replace the covenant forged at the Mountain of Sinai where they received God's Law. Instead of carving His Law on tablets of stone, God will carve into every person's heart. He will adopt them again as His children. He will be their God. They will be His people. There will no longer be a need for high priests to intercede for God Himself will be their intercessor. Their mediator. Their teacher. He will wipe away their sin. He will cleanse them from their iniquity. He will restore them to right relationship with Him.

How will all this happen? Jesus. In Jesus, God meets His people face to face. He rends the heavens and comes to earth. He comes down to our level. He meets us where we are. He speaks our language. Endures our suffering. Becomes one with us. God with us. He dies in our place. Taking the sins of the

world on His shoulders. He turns aside the Father's wrath. He pays the full penalty for our sin. He satisfies the demands of divine justice. And after rising again from the grave and ascending into heaven, He sends us His Spirit. To dwell in our hearts. To give us a heart transplant. It is the Spirit of God who inscribed God's Law into our hearts. It is the Spirit of God who regenerates us so that we might know the Living God. It is the Spirit of God who applies the work of Jesus to our lives. It is the Spirit of God who guarantees our salvation. This is why Jeremiah buys a field. He can see into the future and He trusts God to make good on His promise.

Do you trust God to make good on His promises? Do you take God at His Word? In the midst of all the trials and struggles and heartbreaks of this life, do you look to Jesus for hope? No matter where you've been. No matter where life has taken you. No matter what you've experienced - good, bad, or ugly - you can trust God to faithful and true. He is calling out to you. He is reaching out for you. He is working right now to bring you home. Embrace the new covenant He offers you in Christ and you will find the peace you've been searching for.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 33-34, 1 Timothy 4, Psalms 89:1-13, Proverbs 25:23-24

October 19, 2019
AMAZING GRACE

Readings for today: Jeremiah 33-34, 1 Timothy 4, Psalms 89:1-13, Proverbs 25:23-24

God's grace is truly amazing. No matter how bad things get. No matter how far we fall. No matter how fast we run. God is always quick to forgive. Quick to relent of the judgment our sin rightfully deserves. Zedekiah is another in a long line of evil kings. Kings who reject the will of God. Kings who worship idols. Kings who seek their own glory and power instead of humbly serving God. Judgment is coming. Jeremiah has been sent to proclaim the impending doom. The sins of Israel are many and have piled up over the years, creating a mess God intends to use Babylon to clean up. It's going to be ugly. It's going to be tragic. It's going to be painful. Many will suffer. Many will die. All they hold dear will be destroyed as God's justice rolls down on the earth.

But even now at the eleventh hour, there is hope. God's mercy makes one last appearance. God commands Jeremiah to speak a word of grace to the nation. To speak words of life instead of death. "Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known... Behold, I will bring to the city health and healing, and I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them. They shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it." (Jeremiah 33:3, 6-9) Yes, they cannot escape God's judgment. Yes, they cannot escape the exile to come. But this is not the final word. God will not allow His eternal covenant to be broken.

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.' "For thus says the Lord: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to make sacrifices forever." (Jeremiah 33:14-18)

Friends, Jesus is the righteous Branch God has caused to spring up out of the waste and desolation that is left of Israel. God sends His Messiah to executive justice and righteousness in the land once more. God sends His Messiah to save His people and secure His city. Jesus is the greater David. The righteous King who now sits on His throne. Jesus is our great High Priest constantly making intercession for us before the Ancient of Days. Jesus is God's answer to all that has gone wrong in this world and Jesus is God's solution to the perpetual problem of human sin.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 35-36, 1 Timothy 5, Psalms 89:14-37, Proverbs 25:25-27

October 20, 2019
READINGS FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Jeremiah 35-36, 1 Timothy 5, Psalms 89:14-37, Proverbs 25:25-27

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 37-38, 1 Timothy 6, Psalms 89:38-52, Proverbs 25:28

October 21, 2019
REJECTING GOD'S WORD

Readings for today: Jeremiah 37-38, 1 Timothy 6, Psalms 89:38-52, Proverbs 25:28

I want to tag back to yesterday's reading for our devotional today because it speaks to our relationship with God's Word. The Bible declares God's Word to be living and active. Breathed out by God Himself. It is sharper than a two-edged sword and pierces to the innermost parts of our beings. God's Word has a power all its own. It never returns empty. It always accomplishes the purposes God sets out for it because God Himself guarantees it.

God is faithful. God is true. God never breaks His Word. From the beginning, God has set His heart on having a people He will call His very own. He made an unbreakable covenant with Abraham. He renewed that covenant at Mt. Sinai. He raised up prophets, priests, and kings to protect the covenant. Over and over again, God declares His covenant to His people. Each generation needing to commit themselves anew. Sadly, God's people were not faithful. They rejected their God. They rejected His Word. They rejected His ways. Perhaps the saddest story of all comes at the end of Israel's national life, where the king literally cuts up God's Word and burns it in the fire.

"Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today. It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the disaster that I intend to do to them, so that every one may turn from his evil way, and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin." (Jeremiah 36:2-3) Jeremiah obeys. He writes everything down on a scroll and gives it to his servant, Baruch, to proclaim. Baruch goes to the Lord's House and reads it in the presence of all who've gathered. Officials from the king's household hear the news and they ask Baruch to come and read the scroll to them. Eventually, the scroll makes it's way into the king's presence for one final hearing. The tension builds. How will the king respond? Will he repent? Will he turn back to the Lord? Will he humble himself and bow the knee? Sadly, the answer is no. He takes out a knife and cuts the scroll to pieces as each line is read and then proceeds to burn it in his fire pit. His rejection of the Word of God is complete and final. So is his doom.

One cannot so easily dispose of God's Word. Coming from the Holy Spirit, it is eternal. Unquenchable. Inflammable. Unbreakable. The grass may wither and the flower may fade but the Word of God endures forever. (Isaiah 40:8) So again the Word comes to Jeremiah. Only this time, judgment has replaced grace. Justice has replaced mercy. God's wrath is about to be fully unveiled. "Thus says the Lord, You have burned this scroll, saying, "Why have you written in it that the king of Babylon will certainly come and destroy this land, and will cut off from it man and beast?" Therefore thus says the Lord concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah: He shall have none to sit on the throne of David, and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day and the frost by night. And I will punish him and his offspring and his servants for their iniquity. I will bring upon them and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem and upon the people of Judah all the disaster that I have pronounced against them, but they would not hear." (Jeremiah 36:29-31)

It is a serious matter to reject the Word of God. To disobey His commands. Whether by ignorance or by deliberate defiance, we rebel against God to our own peril. God takes our sin seriously. Far more seriously than we know. He is so holy. So righteous. So just. His nose cannot bear the stench of sin. His eyes will not behold the stain of sin. His presence will not endure even the appearance of sin. It must be dealt with. It must be done away with. A price must be paid. A sacrifice offered. It will either be us or it will be Christ. Either you receive Christ as your perfect sacrifice. Receive Christ as your perfect

substitute. Receive Christ's atoning death on your behalf or you will bear the punishment yourself. You will receive all the judgment and righteous anger of God. It will be eternal and unending because the depth of your sin and rebellion is eternal and unending.

I know this sounds harsh. I know this doesn't feel good. What about God's love? It is there! In Christ! One cannot separate Christ from the love of God for Christ Himself is the love of God! "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." (1 John 4:10) God has provided a way for you to escape the coming judgment just as He provided a way for Jehoiakim to escape his coming judgment! Repentance! Faith! Accepting the perfect sacrifice God Himself has offered on your behalf! Do not reject the Word of God, friends! Receive Christ and live!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 39-41, 2 Timothy 1, Psalms 90-91, Proverbs 26:1-2

October 22, 2019
EMOTIONAL POWER

Readings for today: Jeremiah 39-41, 2 Timothy 1, Psalms 90-91, Proverbs 26:1-2

I grew up next door to a bully. I was younger than him. Smaller than him. Weaker than him. He made it his goal in life to torment me. Every day I would run outside to play with all the kids in our neighborhood and he would be there waiting for me. The next thing I knew, I was running back inside in tears. My mom first encouraged me to ignore him. When that didn't work, she encouraged me to stand up to him. When that didn't work, she encouraged me to punch him as hard as I could in the mouth. That effectively ended the bullying. As I grew older, I knew I couldn't solve my problems through violence but my feelings still got hurt. People still said mean things about me. Still made fun of me. Still attacked my character from time to time. And something my father used to tell me - that I used to find incredibly frustrating - has stuck with me. "No one hurts your feelings...you allow your feelings to be hurt." No one has emotional power over you unless you give it to them. No one can harm you unless you first make yourself vulnerable. Now I realize there are all kinds of implications to this advice. Some positive. Some negative. But it's the first thing I thought of this morning when I read these words from 2 Timothy... "For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control." (2 Timothy 1:7)

The world tells us we need to be afraid. The world tells us we are weak and vulnerable. The world tells us we are victims of our circumstances. And sometimes the world is right. I know far too many who've suffered abuse. I know far too many who've faced discrimination. I've known far too many who've been the victims of terrible crimes. These things are real and I do not want to diminish them in any way. At the same time, I've also known far too many who live with a spirit of fear. I've known far too many who refuse to take responsibility for their own emotional health and well-being. They make themselves vulnerable to all the wrong people at all the wrong times. They are the victims of their own poor choices and when confronted, they blame-shift. They believe the lies that they are powerless, helpless, and hopeless. Their despair is heartbreaking.

Friends, God has not given us a spirit of fear. He has given us a spirit of power, love, and self-control. He has not left us helpless and hopeless, abandoned and alone. He has given us His Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. You have been given a spirit of power so that you might transcend your circumstances. You have been given a spirit of love that is in no way contingent on the actions, attitudes, or response of another human being. You have been given a spirit of self-control that allows to fight against both your sinful nature and the corrupt systems of this world. Don't believe the lies! You are not trapped! You are not a victim! You are not a lost cause! These things do not define you!

If you are in Christ then you have been filled with His Spirit. The same Spirit that sustained Christ through His life, death, and resurrection now lives inside of you! Think of all Christ endured in this life. All the injustice. All the abuse. All the suffering. All the pain. Think of the wrongful imprisonment. The mock trial. The extreme torture. The agonizing death. And yet Jesus never plays the victim. "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father." (John 10:18)

In some strange way, my father was right. No one hurts my feelings unless I let them. No one takes my joy from me unless I allow it. No one takes my peace from me unless I first give them permission. I have been given authority over my life through Christ. I have been given authority over my body through Christ. I have been given authority over my emotions through Christ. I have been given authority over my mind through Christ. Does this mean bad things will never happen to me? Of course not. In this world we will suffer. In this world we will face trials and temptations. But my life is now hid with Christ so I no longer need be afraid. I've been crucified with Christ and no longer live so this world has no hold on me. This world has nothing for me. My eyes are fixed on Christ who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising its shame.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 42:1-44:23, 2 Timothy 2:1-21, Psalms 92-93, Proverbs 26:3-5

October 23, 2019
GOSPEL HOPE

Readings for today: Jeremiah 42:1-44:23, 2 Timothy 2:1-21, Psalms 92-93, Proverbs 26:3-5

Lesslie Newbigin was an Anglican missionary in India for decades. When he retired, he returned home to England where he spent the rest of his life speaking, teaching, and writing about the mission of God around the world. He was asked one day - based on all he had seen - if he was an optimist or a pessimist. I love his response. "I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist; Jesus Christ is risen from the dead."

It sounds like a non-sequitur. Like Newbigin was avoiding the question. I don't think so. After all his years in the mission field, I think his thinking simply transcended the binary categories of this world. For Newbigin, it's not about whether the world is getting better or worse because he knows his only hope is in Christ Jesus. His only hope is in the Kingdom Jesus inaugurated on earth through his death and resurrection. He lives therefore by a different set of rules. He thinks in eternal categories. His eyes have been permanently lifted above the chaos that fills the earth to the peace that comes only from heaven.

The Apostle Paul shares Newbigin's perspective. And he is trying to pass it on to his young protege, Timothy. "Timothy, my dear son, be strong through the grace that God gives you in Christ Jesus...Endure suffering along with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. Soldiers don't get tied up in the affairs of civilian life, for then they cannot please the officer who enlisted them. And athletes cannot win the prize unless they follow the rules. And hardworking farmers should be the first to enjoy the fruit of their labor...Always remember that Jesus Christ, a descendant of King David, was raised from the dead. This is the Good News I preach. And because I preach this Good News, I am suffering and have been chained like a criminal. But the word of God cannot be chained. So I am willing to endure anything if it will bring salvation and eternal glory in Christ Jesus to those God has chosen." (2 Timothy 2:1, 3-6, 8-10) So much of the New Testament from Jesus to Paul to Peter to James to John directs our gaze heavenward. To the place where no moth, rust, or thieves break into steal. To the place where homes are being built not made by human hands. To the place Jesus ascended in order to prepare the way for us. Heaven is the Christian's home. This world is passing away with all its trinkets and trivialities. All its suffering and heartbreak and pain. As good soldiers in Christ, we don't get caught up in its affairs. As God's athletes, we are competing for a heavenly prize. As spiritual farmers, we are sowing and reaping eternal rewards.

Does this mean we forget this world? Does it mean we become so heavenly minded we are of no earthly good? Of course not. We are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world. We are sent out to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. The good news of the gospel. Filled with God's grace and the Holy Spirit, we work to bring God's will, God's way, God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. But we do so soberly. Humbly. Meekly. Always recognizing the temptation to place our hopes in our own strength. Our own wisdom. Our own effort. If we aren't careful, we'll start to believe our own hype. We'll fall into the trap of thinking we can bring the Kingdom of heaven to earth without any help from the King.

This is why Paul leaves Timothy with the following admonition..."This is a trustworthy saying: If we die with him, we will also live with him. If we endure hardship, we will reign with him. If we deny him, he will deny us. If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny who he is. Remind everyone about these things..." (2 Timothy 2:11-14) Friends, our only hope in life and in death is that we belong - body and soul - to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ. No matter how life is going for you - good, bad, ugly - do not place your hope in your circumstances. Do not despair over your circumstances. Fix your eyes on Jesus and let His hope fill your heart!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 44:24-47:7, 2 Timothy 2:22-3:17, Psalms 94, Proverbs 26:6-8

October 24, 2019
THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Readings for today: Jeremiah 44:24-47:7, 2 Timothy 2:22-3:17, Psalms 94, Proverbs 26:6-8

"Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." (Revelation 11:15)

I wonder if we truly grasp the implications of what we pray in the Lord's Prayer. Do we really mean what we say when we ask our Father to accomplish "His will on earth as it is in heaven." It reminds me of the famous quote from Annie Dillard, "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return." Or the great quote from CS Lewis, "It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." We simply cannot see beyond the horizons of this world. We refuse to look past the immediate gratification of our desires. We are all materialists at heart, believing this world is all there is and refusing to acknowledge the reality of a bigger, larger, more glorious kingdom. We hold onto the power and privilege of this world and refuse to surrender our hearts to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We give Him part of our lives - as if we have that option - and believe He will somehow give us a pass on the rest. We believe He's returning one day but we forget that with that return comes the final judgment when all of our thoughts, attitudes, and actions will be laid bare.

I am not sure why God's actions take us by surprise. He tells us quite clearly and frequently in not so many words that the kingdoms of this world WILL become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. He tells us every knee will bow. Every tongue will confess. In heaven. On earth. Under the earth that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. He tells us He will punish sin and iniquity to the third and fourth generations. He tells us He will protect and defend and discipline His people. He tells us idolatry is a capital offense that deserves the death penalty so it shouldn't surprise us when He executes such judgment on the pagan nations. I know it is scary. It is a picture of God we are not used to seeing. We don't like this view of God. We don't want to acknowledge holiness as a part of His eternal character. We would much rather settle for an indulgent god who loves us as we are and never challenges us or judges us but always accepts and affirms everything we say and do. But such a god bears no resemblance to the God of the Bible.

It is hard to read these words from Jeremiah. It is hard to think about the millions of people who will suffer as a result of the judgment God brings on their nation. It is easy to think of them as innocent bystanders who simply are collateral damage in this war God is waging against the false gods. However, innocence is a lie. There is no such thing as an innocent human being. We are all guilty of idolatry. All guilty of betraying our first love. All guilty of sin and have gone astray and the wages of our sin is death. The just consequence for our behavior is death. God is not losing control here. He is not lashing out. God is not suffering from "road-rage." He is acting in accordance with divine justice.

You may not buy this idea. You may think I'm making excuses for God. After reading this, you may want to throw out your Old Testament. But before you do, please understand you will also be throwing out the cross. The cross makes no sense without the Old Testament. The suffering and death of Jesus makes no sense without all

that has gone before it. Christ comes embedded in a story that is already in progress. In fact, the crucifixion is the apex of this story! It is the climax to this grand narrative! It is the place where God throws down ALL His judgment. ALL His wrath. ALL His righteous anger at human sin. Jesus hangs in our place. Jesus stands in the gap. Jesus becomes our substitute. Taking it ALL on Himself and fully satisfying the Father. And this is why the Father gives Him all authority in heaven and on earth. Jesus bought the throne at the price of His own blood and He shall reign forever and ever!

In fact, He is reigning even now from on high. The world ignores Him at their own peril. He is preparing to come again. This time with glory and power from on high. So hear in Jeremiah's words a warning. Bow the knee. Surrender your will. Submit to Christ. For He is your King!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 48:1-49:22, 2 Timothy 4, Psalms 95-96, Proverbs 26:9-12

October 25, 2019
GOD-BREATHED

Readings for today: Jeremiah 48:1-49:22, 2 Timothy 4, Psalms 95-96, Proverbs 26:9-12

There are two things that are “God-breathed” according to the Bible. Scripture itself and human beings. In the beginning, God creates humanity. Male and female made in His image. Fashioned from the dust of the earth, God brings them to life by breathing His spirit into them. They are given the mandate to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and exercise dominion over all He has made.

In a similar fashion, God brings the Scriptures to life. Without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Without God breathing out these very words, the Bible is just another book. Just another ancient text that may or may not have much relevance for our lives. There would be no difference between it and the Koran or the Book of Mormon or any other sacred text. The sentiment expressed by Paul to his protege, Timothy, in 2 Timothy 3:16 is what sets it apart. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness...” Paul has been following this guidance in his own correspondence with the churches he’s planted. A careful examination shows hundreds of quotes and allusions to the Old Testament. Paul is a first-rate rabbinical scholar who has been taking the text and applying it to the specific situation each church faces. His brilliance at applying the Scriptures in an authoritative way is what sets his letters apart from that of the other church leaders at the time. Even the Apostle Peter recognizes the unique authority Paul’s been given when he writes, “And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters.” (2 Peter 3:15-16)

Throughout history, Christians have believed God reveals Himself in two “books.” The book of nature whereby God reveals Himself as Creator and the book of Scripture whereby God reveals Himself as Savior. The Holy Spirit is the key that unlocks our understanding not only of the world around us but also of the Word of God. He illuminates our hearts and minds. He gives us insight into who God is and what God is about. He speaks to us in ways we can grasp and understand. All so that we will come to a deeper relationship with the One who loves us more than we can ever hope or dream.

If you’ve been tracking with us this year, I am sure you have had moments where God has spoken to you from His Word. Verses that stuck out to you for all sorts of reasons. Perhaps it was a difficult time you were going through. A difficult decision you had to make. Or a difficult situation you needed to resolve. Maybe it was a Word of affirmation that came just at the right time. Or a Word of comfort. Perhaps it was a fresh insight or flash of understanding as you learned something new. These are all signs of the Holy Spirit breathing new life in and through the text. And it never gets old. Never grows stale. There’s always more to learn.

God doesn’t just breathe His Word into you. He wants to breathe His Word through you to the world. This is why Paul concludes his letter to Timothy with a strong charge to preach what he has learned. “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.” (2 Timothy 4:1-5) Friends, now more than ever our world needs the truth of the gospel. Our world is full of all kinds of fake news, lies, deceit, gossip, slander, etc. People are suffering. People are struggling. They are looking for anything and everything to fill that eternal void in their hearts. How is God responding to this great need? He sends you. He sends me. The people on whom He has breathed His Spirit and into whom He has breathed His Word! So fulfill your calling! Engage your ministry! Do the work of evangelism and share the good news of Jesus with everyone you meet!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 49:23-50:46, Titus, Psalms 97-98, Proverbs 26:13-16

October 26, 2019
GOD'S WAR WITH EVIL

Readings for today: Jeremiah 49:23-50:46, Titus 1, Psalms 97-98, Proverbs 26:13-16

Exile from the Garden. Death in the Great Flood. Confusion at the Tower of Babel. Plagues in Egypt. Conquest of Canaan. What do all these biblical events have in common? God's perpetual war against evil. God has made it clear from the beginning of time that He will not allow humanity to persist in sin. Just as He did not allow Adam and Eve to stretch out their hand and eat of the Tree of Life in the Garden after their sin, so He will not allow us to go on living in idolatry. God hates sin. He hates the idolatry of our hearts. He hates unrighteousness. He hates evil.

Now I want to be very clear here. Just because God hates sin DOES NOT mean He hates sinners. Just because God hates idolatry DOES NOT mean He hates those who make the idols. God loves the world. God loves His creation. God loves those made in His image. And because His love is fierce and loyal and steadfast and true, He hates what sin does to us. He hates how it corrupts us. He hates how it breaks us. He hates how it dehumanizes us. In this way, God's "hatred" is strangely comforting. It is strangely comforting to know God hates my sin so much He would die on a cross for me. It is strangely comforting to know God hates my sin so much He would send His Spirit to indwell me and sanctify me from within. It is strangely comforting to know God hates my sin so much He gives me the opportunity to repent and return to Him an almost infinite number of times. And what is true for me is also true for entire communities. Cities. Nations.

God sets out to destroy the Ammonites. To punish them for their sin. The discipline of God is harsh and brutal and terrifying. But the section ends with a strange promise. God will restore the fortunes of the Ammonites. God sets out to destroy Elam. To punish them for their sin. The discipline of God is harsh and brutal and terrifying. But again, there is this strange promise. God will restore the fortunes of Elam.

God set out to destroy His own people. The nation of Israel in both its northern and southern kingdoms. "Israel is a hunted sheep driven away by lions. First the king of Assyria devoured him, and now at last Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has gnawed his bones." (Jeremiah 50:17) He punished them for their sin. The discipline of God was harsh and brutal and terrifying. But now the tables turn. The very instruments God used to bring about His discipline now come under His judgment. Where is the might of Assyria? What happened to her? Her meteoric rise in human history was matched by her sudden fall. The same is true for Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar was the mightiest ruler of his time but his empire would not last. Why? Because he did not just battle with Israel. He went to war with God Himself.

Psalm 97 is one of my favorites... "The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad! Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around. His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth. The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all the peoples see his glory. All worshipers of images are put to shame, who make their boast in worthless idols; worship him, all you gods! Zion hears and is glad, and the daughters of Judah rejoice, because of your judgments, O Lord. For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods. O you who love the Lord, hate evil! He preserves the lives of his saints; he delivers them from the hand of the wicked. Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart. Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name!" No one can resist God's power. No one can match His might. It is God who holds the fate of the nations in His hands. God who directs their paths. God who sets their courses. It is God who causes them to rise and fall according to His will and His plan. No one escapes God's judgment. No one can hide from His sight. No one can run from His presence. God is on the march! He will not rest until the

whole earth is cleansed. He will not relent until the whole earth repents and turns to Him. He will not let up until sin and evil is utterly defeated and destroyed.

What is our response? Fear? Trembling? On some level, the answer is yes. Even better, it should be humility. Confession. Repentance. Joy. For this same God has promised to make all things new. Including you. Including me. He has promised one day to wipe away all our tears. Eliminate all pain and suffering. Gather His children to Himself in glory to live forever safe and secure in His loving arms. Turn to God, friends. Suffer under His discipline no longer. Let His Spirit cleanse you and sanctify you and give you a heart that beats for Jesus alone.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 51:1-53, Titus 2, Psalms 99, Proverbs 26:17

October 27, 2019
I WAS BLIND BUT NOW I SEE

Readings for today: Jeremiah 51:44-52, Titus 3, Psalms 100, Proverbs 26:18-19

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.

Those words ran through my head this morning as we read about the final days of the Kingdom of Judah and the end of Zedekiah. It's a pretty gory picture. The King of Babylon captures him as he tries to escape. Makes him watch while he slaughters his sons and then puts out his eyes. It's that last detail that I found myself pondering. Why does it appear so many times in these readings? Jeremiah mentions it twice in chapters 39 and 52. The historians mention it as well in 2 Kings 25. Perhaps it's just a painful reminder of how utterly broken Zedekiah had become before the judgment of the Lord.

As I pondered this little detail, I began to wonder if there wasn't something more symbolic at work as well. After all, Zedekiah had been spiritually blind for years. He reigned for eleven years in Jerusalem but did evil in the sight of the Lord. He did not honor God. He did not walk in God's ways or according to God's commands. He disdained the Word of the Lord and rejected the worship of the Lord. So perhaps his physical blindness is simply the logical consequence for his spiritual blindness and that's why it's mentioned so many times. Or maybe I'm reading too much into it...:-)

I remember my own spiritual blindness. I was raised in the church. My parents were faithful to take me to worship every Sunday. I sang in the choir. I hung out at youth group. By all outward appearances, I was incredibly engaged. However, my heart was hard. Selfish. Locked in sin. I was blinded by my own desires. My own fears. My own doubts. I could not see God. Could not hear God. Did not want to follow God. This was all exposed my freshman year of college. Once outside of the protective rhythms and accountability my parents set, I floundered. I was lost. I wandered aimlessly. I drank heavily. Skipped class. Avoided God. When confronted, I blamed others. I blamed my professors. I blamed my friends. I was so blind I could not see the wretch I'd become.

That's when I met Jesus. He confronted me on a sidewalk right outside the UMC up on the campus of the University of Colorado. He opened my eyes and it was like I was seeing the world for the very first time. The light was blinding. The exposure painful. All my sins were laid bare before Him. There was no escape. I was overwhelmed by sorrow. Overwhelmed by grief. Overwhelmed by the depth of my sin. The road back to health was not easy. It was one tentative step after another. It required facing the consequences of my actions. The brokenness of my relationships. The anxiety of my failures. But Jesus was faithful. He was the light for my feet. The lamp for my path. Because my eyes had been opened, I could actually see the way He laid out for me.

I have no idea where you find yourself this morning. If you are blind or if you can see. Perhaps you are like Zedekiah or like I was prior to receiving Christ. Groping in the dark. Stumbling around in the shadows. Blinded by your desires. Fears. Doubts. Failures. I pray you come to Jesus! The One who specializes in restoring sight to the blind! Let Him open your eyes! Let Him show you His glory!

Readings for tomorrow: Lamentations 1-2, Philemon, Psalms 101, Proverbs 26:20

October 29, 2019

LAMENT

Readings for today: Lamentations 1-2, Philemon, Psalms 101, Proverbs 26:20

I am flying over the Atlantic Ocean right now. On a mission trip bound for Ethiopia. I will spend the next two weeks among the poorest of the poor. Men and women of whom the world is not worthy. Their suffering is unspeakable. Many of them have been beaten. Stabbed. Shot. Some have lost loved ones. Others have been imprisoned. They face hunger, thirst, disease and a host of other challenges that come along with living in the developing world. The people in the villages they serve are even worse off. They face drought. Famine. Natural disasters of various kinds. They have little to no access to healthcare or education or any of the other advantages I take for granted. Death is a constant companion. The result is a lot of despair. Depression. Hopelessness.

Lament is such an important spiritual discipline. It's okay to grieve. It's okay to weep. It's okay to have one's heart broken over the state of the world. In fact, I've often prayed for God to give me His eyes to see and His heart for the world but only recently have I realized that God's eyes are full of tears and His heart is a broken one. Lament allows us to share in God's suffering for the world. It gives us a language to express our pain and heartbreak back to our Heavenly Father who loves us so much.

The suffering of the people of Israel in the wake of the fall of Jerusalem is overwhelming. You can hear the cries of their hearts in the raw emotions of Lamentations. "She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has none to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her; they have become her enemies...Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger...For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me, one to revive my spirit; my children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed...Look, O Lord, for I am in distress; my stomach churns; my heart is wrung within me..." (Lamentations 1:2, 12, 16, 20) These are cries of dereliction. Cries of helplessness and hopelessness. There is nothing more bitter than the taste of utter despair.

Furthermore, they know all of this is from God. They recognize it as His divine punishment on them for their sin. "How the Lord in his anger has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud! He has cast down from heaven to earth the splendor of Israel; he has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger...The Lord has scorned his altar, disowned his sanctuary...The Lord determined to lay in ruins the wall of the daughter of Zion; he stretched out the measuring line; he did not restrain his hand from destroying; he caused rampart and wall to lament; they languished together. Her gates have sunk into the ground; he has ruined and broken her bars; her king and princes are among the nations; the law is no more, and her prophets find no vision from the Lord." (Lamentations 2:1, 7-9) I can imagine nothing worse than feeling abandoned by God. To experience His wrath in place of His love. His justice in place of His mercy. To experience God as enemy rather than friend. Frankly, that sounds like hell to me.

Lamentations is a book that honors the deepest, darkest, and most desperate places of our hearts. It invites us to grieve terribly over the state of our broken human condition. It encourages us to weep. It affirms our sorrow. The book reveals a God of terrifying justice and great faithfulness. It encourages us to come humbly before God acknowledging our sin yet confident in His grace. Whatever pain, suffering, or heartbreak we may experience in this life. Self-inflicted or not. Circumstantial or not. We can cry out in all honesty to God, "But you, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations. Why do you forget us forever, why do you forsake us for so many days?" (Lamentations 5:19-20) And we can be just as certain He will answer our prayers. "Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old." (Lamentations 5:21)

Readings for tomorrow: Lamentations 3, Hebrews 1, Psalms 102, Proverbs 26:21-22

October 30, 2019
GOD'S FAITHFULNESS IS GREAT

Readings for today: Lamentations 3, Hebrews 1, Psalms 102, Proverbs 26:21-22

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." (Lamentations 3:22-26)

Some of the most precious words in all of Scripture are found in the most unlikely of places. Consider these verses from our reading today. They are the inspiration behind one of the greatest hymns in the Christian world. They are sung at funerals and in times of great sorrow as the people of God remind themselves of God's promise. And yet, they come in the midst of a book full of unspeakable suffering and pain. Terrors on every side. God literally waging war on His people for their sin. God razing His city to the ground. Tearing His Temple down to its foundations. Lamentations is one of the hardest books for us to read much less understand. How could God treat His people in this way? How could God literally become our enemy? What does that say about us? What does it say about God?

There is constant theme running throughout all of Scripture. The world is fallen. It is not as it should be. All the pain and suffering, violence and evil was not part of God's original design. It is the direct result of human rebellion. Humanity refuses to worship God in the way He deserves and the way He demands. Instead, we aspire to be gods ourselves. We want to be in control. We want to be in charge. We fight and claw for as much power and wealth and control as possible. The result? Our world groans under the weight of our sin. Sadly, we refuse to take responsibility, choosing instead to blame God for our mess. Yes, the world is fallen but the good news is that God has not abandoned her. He will not let His creation descend into chaos and self-destruction. He reaches out to the world over and over again. He sets apart a people to be His chosen instrument of blessing to the nations. He sends them prophets and priests and kings to lead them in the way of righteousness. His will is for them to herald His great love and faithfulness. Alas, they fail. Their sin gets in the way. They conform to the ways of this world and the result is destruction and exile.

The Bible would be a depressing book indeed except that a deeper and even grander theme emerges. The great faithfulness of God! Yes, this world is fallen but God is not done. Yes, things are not as they should be but God is making all things new. Yes, God's original design has gone awry but God will not let go. God will have the worship He deserves and demands and so He sends His Son. He reveals Himself in all His glory in Jesus. His steadfast love and faithfulness takes on flesh and blood. His mercies take on human form. And those who wait for the Lord will find Him. Those who look to the Messiah will find salvation. They do not hope in vain for God is faithful to Himself. He is true to His own character. He is not like us. He does not lie. He does not change His mind. His love is eternal. His mercies renewed every morning. His grace amazing. His faithfulness is indeed great!

Readings for tomorrow: Lamentations 4-5, Hebrews 2, Psalms 103, Proverbs 26:23

October 31, 2019
JESUS IS GREATER

Readings for today: Lamentations 4-5, Hebrews 2, Psalms 103, Proverbs 26:23

Who is Jesus? A great teacher? An enlightened human being? An angel from heaven? Some kind of celestial creature? Or is He God Himself? God taking on flesh and blood and moving into our world to be with us? Centuries ago, Jesus asked his disciples the most important question we will ever face in this life. "Who do you say that I am?" How you answer that makes all the difference in this life and the next.

Thankfully, God doesn't leave anything to chance. He gives us the Book of Hebrews which sets out to answer this all-important question for the people of God and the author wastes no time getting right to the point. "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs." (Hebrews 1:3-4) Everything you ever wanted to know about God is revealed in Christ. All the questions you ever wanted to ask about God's nature and character are answered in Christ. All the doubts and fears you've been harboring regarding God's love and grace are quelled in Christ. He shows us who God is in all His fullness. In all His glory. In all His majesty and power. There is no God lurking in the shadows beyond Jesus. There is no God hiding behind Jesus. God has not withheld any part of Himself but instead reveals Himself fully in Jesus.

Jesus is greater than any angel from heaven. His splendor and might far exceeds that of the heavenly host. He upholds the universe by His power. He purifies the human race by laying down His life for their sin. He destroys the power of death through His resurrection. He is given all authority in heaven and on earth as He ascends to sit at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. No angel could ever accomplish such things.

Why would God do such a thing? Why would God choose this way to reveal Himself? Why did God not choose a different way? Because God is faithful to Himself. Faithful to His plan. From the beginning, His design was that humanity would reign and rule with Him over all creation. God's plan was for you and me to serve as His vice-regents on this earth, caring for all He has made. Yes, our rebellion introduced sin and evil into the world and we've been paying the price ever since. But God will not let us go. Instead, He made Jesus a little lower than the angels "so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting that God, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source..." (Hebrews 2:9-11) Jesus was "perfected" through suffering. Not that He became something He was not but that He perfected the plan of salvation God had in place from before the foundations of the world.

And this gives us hope. "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." (Hebrews 2:14-18) Jesus did not come to save angels. The devil and his demons are beyond redemption. Jesus came to save the sons and daughters of Abraham. He came to save humanity from fear and death and the devil. In order to do that, He had to be made like us in every way. Taking on a fallen – though not sinful – human nature. In this way, He can represent us before His Father as our faithful and eternal high priest. So back to the original question. Who is Jesus? If He is just a good teacher then His death is meaningless. If He's just an enlightened human being then we can take or leave what He has to say. If He's an angel or some other celestial creature then He is not like us and we are left without hope. But if He is God – as the Bible clearly and unequivocally declares Him to be – then we can trust Him when He says our sins are forgiven and we are set free.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 1:1-3:15, Hebrews 3, Psalms 104:1-23, Proverbs 26:24-26