

JULY 2021

July 1, 2021 Comfort in Suffering

Readings for today: Job 10-12, Acts 8:4-25

July 2, 2021 Living Hope

Readings for today: Job 13-15, Acts 8:26-40

July 3, 2021 Redemptive Suffering

Readings for today: Job 16-18, Acts 9:1-22

July 5, 2021 Courage to Care

Readings for today: Job 19-23, Acts 9:23-10:8

July 6, 2021 Miraculous Gifts

Readings for today: Job 24-25, Acts 10:9-48

July 7, 2021 The Blessing of Being Powerless

Readings for today: Job 26-27, Acts 11

July 9, 2021 Self-Examination

Readings for today: Job 31-32, Acts 13:1-25

July 10, 2021 The First Missionaries

Readings for today: Job 33-34, Acts 13:26-53

July 12, 2021 Feeling Small

Readings for today: Job 35-40, Acts 14

July 13, 2021 Repentance

Readings for today: Job 41-42, Psalm 1, Acts 15

July 14, 2021 Vision

Readings for today: Psalms 2-3, Acts 16:1-15

July 15, 2021 Being before Doing

Readings for today: Psalms 4-6, Acts 16:16-40

July 16, 2021 Imago Dei

Readings for today: Psalms 7-9, Acts 17:1-15

July 17, 2021 Holding onto Hope

Readings for today: Psalms 10-12, Acts 17:16-34

July 19, 2021 Godly Contentment

Readings for today: Psalms 13-18, Acts 18

July 20, 2021 Following the Way

Readings for today: Psalms 19-22, Acts 19

July 21, 2021 Psalm 23

Readings for today: Psalms 23-24, Acts 20:1-16

July 22, 2021 The Path of Righteousness

Readings for today: Psalms 25-27, Acts 20:17-38

July 23, 2021 Gratitude

Readings for today: Psalms 28-30, Acts 21:1-16

July 24, 2021 People of the Truth

Readings for today: Psalms 31-33, Acts 21:17-36

July 26, 2021 Fixing our Eyes on Jesus

Readings for today: Psalms 34-38, Acts 21:37-23:11

July 27, 2021 Life is Fleeting

Readings for today: Psalms 39-41, Acts 23:12-35

July 28, 2021 Mental Health

Readings for today: Psalms 42-43, Acts 24

July 30, 2021 God's Politics

Readings for today: Psalms 47-49, Acts 26

July 31, 2021 Preparing for Worship

Readings for today: Psalms 50-52, Acts 27:1-26

July 1, 2021
Comfort in Suffering

Readings for today: Job 10-12, Acts 8:4-25

One of the things I've learned over my twenty-plus years of pastoring is how to meet people in their suffering. How to best come alongside them, providing comfort and relief and a safe space to grieve. Most of the time when someone asks, "Why?" what they are really asking is "Where?" They may say things like, "Why did God allow this to happen to me? Why did God let this happen to the person I love? Why does God allow such things to happen in the world around us?" But if you try and give them the biblical or theological answer, it will fall on deaf ears. Because they don't really want to know "why" so much as "where." "Where was God when this happened to me? Where was God when this happened to the person I love? Where is God when such terrible and tragic things happen in the world around me?" Is He there? Is He present? Is He amidst the suffering? Does He suffer to?

Job's friends are perfect examples of what happens when we fail to listen with our hearts. They keep listening to Job's words and trying to answer his questions but that's not what Job needs or wants in this moment. Job is wise. He already knows the answers to the questions he's posing. "But I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you. Who does not know such things as these?" (Job 12:3) So the last thing he needs is a refresher on his theology. What he needs is his friends to simply sit with him in the ashes of his life. Weep with him over all he has lost. Listen to him as he rages at God for all that has happened. Let him get it all out. But his questions make them uncomfortable. His pain makes them uneasy. They are not courageous enough to manage their own anxiety as they listen to their dear friend grieve. So they start to respond. They start to push back. They start to correct and challenge. Rather than comfort Job, they are now trying to comfort themselves.

"Should a multitude of words go unanswered, and a man full of talk be judged right? Should your babble silence men, and when you mock, shall no one shame you? For you say, 'My doctrine is pure, and I am clean in God's eyes.' But oh, that God would speak and open his lips to you, and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom! For he is manifold in understanding. Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves." (Job 11:2-6) Zophar cannot help himself. Job's complaints are too painful. Too raw. Too real. He feels they demand an answer. And while he gets his theology right, he could not be more wrong. He is responding to Job without love which is why his words come off sounding like a noisy gong or clashing cymbal.

Love is essential when responding to suffering. Agape love. Selfless love. Love that is patient and tender and kind. Love that never insists on its own way or draws attention to itself. This sort of love can bear the suffering of another. This sort of love can believe God is present even in those moments when life is at its most heartbreaking. This sort of love provides hope in the face of tragedy. This sort of love endures when all seems lost. This is the love Job needed from his friends. He didn't need answers to his questions. He didn't need a response to his rage. He simply needed friends who would listen and love him in the midst of his terrible condition.

God shows us this love. He met us in the utter tragedy of our sinful condition and became one of us. One with us. One for us. He was not afraid to sit with us in the ashes of our existence. He didn't feel the need to correct us, judge us, or condemn us. Instead, He offers us unconditional love. While we were still sinners. Still at war with God. Still trapped in our rebellion. Still enslaved to our corrupt desires. Christ comes to us. Christ suffers for us. Christ dies for us. This is how God defines love. It's never about Him. It's always about us and His desire to rescue us out of our brokenness and pain. In

this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and gave Himself up for us. This, friends, is how we show love to others. This is how we meet them in the midst of their suffering and pain. We comfort them with the same comfort Christ showed to us.

Readings for tomorrow: Jon 13-15, Acts 8:26-40

July 2, 2021
Living Hope

Readings for today: Job 13-15, Acts 8:26-40

I love these words from 1 Peter - “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” (1 Peter 1:3-5) They inspire me. They encourage me. They serve as a constant reminder to me that my hope is not of this world. My hope is not in the things of this world. All my achievements. All my accomplishments. Everything I might be tempted to place my trust in will eventually turn to dust.

Life in this world is hard. It is harsh and brutal. It is full of pain and suffering. The fact that I can escape most of it or mitigate it due to my wealth and position and privilege and the nation where I live doesn’t erase this fact. I have been around the world. I have seen how most people live. They wake up each morning and walk miles to work. They bear heavy burdens all day long. They drink water that is not clean. They eat food that is scarce and unhealthy. They are vulnerable to disease and violence and natural disasters like drought and famine. They get no days off. No weekends free. No vacations. They rarely travel beyond the bounds of their village or region. Death comes almost as a welcome relief from all the hardship, toil, and pain. Death comes for me as well. Death comes for us all. He is undefeated. He can only be held back for so long. Only be pushed away for a time. Eventually he will have his way with us. And his ways are often painful and terrifying. Perhaps that’s why I resonate so much with what Job says this morning...“But the mountain falls and crumbles away, and the rock is removed from its place; the waters wear away the stones; the torrents wash away the soil of the earth; so you destroy the hope of man.” (Job 14:18-19)

Nothing lasts forever. Nothing lives forever. Only God is eternal. This world is broken. Things move from order to chaos. Even the mountains eventually crumble and fall. The waters wear away the stone. The waves crash over the earth. Nothing we build will endure. Nothing we do will outlast us. No one will remember our names. No one will remember our deeds. The point of all this is to drive us to our knees in holy despair. To teach us to never place any trust in ourselves. To never hold onto any hope in this life. God sets out to destroy the hope of man not to punish but to root out the deepest sin of our souls. We are not like God. Let me say that again...we are not like God. It’s the oldest temptation, of course. The one that got Adam and Eve kicked out of the garden. The one that continues to afflict us even to this day. We believe we are like God. We believe we chart our own destinies. We believe we are the masters of our own fates. We believe we are righteous on some level before Him. But none of this is true. Not for Job. Not for Job’s friends. Not for us.

Once we have been driven to our knees. Once we’ve had everything stripped away. Once all our accomplishments have turned to dust. Once we lose all hope in ourselves and our abilities and our wisdom and our strength and our honor and our righteousness then we finally can turn to God. Our eyes will rise above the things of this world and we will discover the living hope that is ours in Christ Jesus. We will find ourselves looking forward to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. We will trust God alone to guard our lives through faith in a salvation that one day will be revealed in all its glory.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 16-18, Acts 9:1-22

July 3, 2021
Redemptive Suffering

Readings for today: Job 16-18, Acts 9:1-22

Painting of the Parable of the Good Samaritan by Balthasar van Cortbemde (1647)

Yesterday, I found myself wearing down in a long conversation as I advocated for the truth of the gospel. After hours of talking, I went to bed tired and frustrated by the whole affair. It isn't easy to take up the plight of the poor. To fight for the oppressed. To defend the marginalized. And then I began to think about all the dear friends and loved ones I have here at home and around the world who live this reality. Day in and day out, they suffer. They experience pain and heartache. They endure injustice. There is no end to it all. And they aren't the only ones who struggle. I think about the impoverished. Those who live day to day, searching for food and water. I think about the aged. Those who are losing their minds and whose bodies are failing. I think about those who are battling mental health issues. I think about their mental anguish. The daily fight to get out of bed. The pain of this world is simply overwhelming.

I think about my own struggles over the years. I think about what it was like to lose our first child. The numbness followed by the deep grief. The tears I shed. The pain I felt when the doctor walked us through all the problems he had. No ribs. No lungs. No limbs. Fluid buildup. Heart failure. It was like one blow after another. A relentless onslaught. How did Job put it? "He breaks me with breach upon breach; he runs upon me like a warrior." (Job 16:14) I think about our time in Wisconsin. Reaching the point of deep brokenness in our marriage. Coming face to face with my deepest insecurities and fears. Feeling overwhelmed on a daily basis. Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. I blamed You, God. I fought with You, God. For months I paced the floor, crying out to You all night long. I barely got any sleep and when I did it was anxious and restless. You stripped my life down to the studs. You took everything from me that I could possibly hold onto. There were nights I prayed for it all to end. I said with Job, "My spirit is broken; my days are extinct; the graveyard is ready for me." (Job 17:1)

But then, in the middle of the deep darkness, I discovered a profound truth. When I hit rock bottom and had nothing left, I found You. You were there waiting for me. And You showed Yourself sufficient for all my needs. You comforted me. You nursed me back to health. You gave me hope. You renewed your promise. I think of Job's statement of faith at the end of chapter 16, "There must be Someone in heaven who knows the truth about me, in highest heaven, some Attorney who can clear my name— My Champion, my Friend, while I'm weeping my eyes out before God. I appeal to the One who represents mortals before God as a neighbor stands up for a neighbor. (Job 16:19-21 MSG) At the end of all things, I found Jesus. The Alpha and the Omega. The first and the last. He was there all along. He heard my cries. He endured my rage. He wiped my tears. He heard my heart. He met me in my suffering. He came to me when all hope seemed lost. My faith was renewed. My life never the same. It was like a second conversion. A confirmation of the Psalmist's promise that even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death we do not need to fear for God is with us.

I look back on that time and, while I would not wish it on my worst enemy, I wouldn't trade it for the world. To come to the end of oneself, one must truly come to the end of oneself. To deny oneself and pick up a cross, one has to endure incredible suffering and pain. To discover the depths of the sufficiency of God and His grace, one must be stripped of all things they might be tempted to seek solace in instead. It's not easy to tear down the idols of one's life or to have them torn down for you by God Himself. It's not easy to let God truly have His way. To let Him break you of the lust of the flesh, the

lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. When He cuts, He cuts deep. To the heart. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God. His Word is like a double-edged sword “piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12) So today I am thankful for God’s severe mercies. Thankful for His steadfast love and faithfulness. Thankful for the ways He has broken me and the ways He has bound me back up. My life is in His hands.

Readings for tomorrow: None

July 5, 2021
Courage to Care

Readings for today: Job 19-23, Acts 9:23-10:8

There is nothing worse than feeling abandoned. Nothing worse than feeling all alone. Nothing worse than feeling like those closest to you have pulled away. Those closest to you have walked away. This is especially true when you are in pain. When you are struggling with a physical or mental illness or addiction. I think of the heartbreak of this past year. Hundreds of thousands of people dying from COVID. Their pain compounded by the fact that many of them died alone. The draconian restrictions preventing so many from being at the bedside of those they loved as they passed from this life to the next. I think of the many people I know who need community to successfully fight their addiction. Their isolation led to relapse. Their loneliness led to despair. Rates of substance abuse and suicide due to overdose rose dramatically.

The Bible is clear. It is not good for us to be alone. We were not meant to do this life on our own. Especially when we are suffering. Job's words are especially heartbreakingly true this morning. "He has put my brothers far from me, and those who knew me are wholly estranged from me. My relatives have failed me, my close friends have forgotten me. The guests in my house and my maidservants count me as a stranger; I have become a foreigner in their eyes. I call to my servant, but he gives me no answer; I must plead with him with my mouth for mercy. My breath is strange to my wife, and I am a stench to the children of my own mother. Even young children despise me; when I rise they talk against me. All my intimate friends abhor me, and those whom I loved have turned against me. My bones stick to my skin and to my flesh, and I have escaped by the skin of my teeth. Have mercy on me, have mercy on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has touched me! Why do you, like God, pursue me? Why are you not satisfied with my flesh?" (Job 19:13-22)

Can you imagine how it must have felt for Job to be abandoned in his hour of greatest need? Here was a man who had dedicated his life to comforting others. Dedicated his life to caring for others. He had built a reputation for godliness in his community. He was engaged. He was connected. He was faithful. But when push came to shove and the roles were reversed, he was all alone. His community failed him. His family failed him. His servants failed him. His friends failed him. Even his wife left him. He had no one. No one to comfort him. No one to help him. No one to bathe his wounds. No one to take him in. There simply is nothing worse than feeling abandoned in your hour of greatest need.

This is what makes Job's declaration of faith even more astounding. Out of the depths of his despair, he cries, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another." (Job 19:25-27) He holds onto God for dear life. At the end of it all. When everything has been taken away. When all his loved ones have walked away. When his life is full of nothing but pain and suffering. He refuses to let go of God. He refuses to relinquish his faith. No matter what happens, he will go to the grave trusting he will see God.

This raises two important questions for me this morning. First, do I have the faith of Job? If everything were taken from me, would I still believe? Would I still hold onto God? Or do I love God because of the blessings He has poured into my life? Second, do I walk away from those who are suffering? Do I pull back from those in pain? Or do I lean in? Do I remain engaged? Do I courageously and tenaciously hold onto them even if/when they try to push me away? Do I seek to comfort with the same comfort I've been comforted with by God? Can you imagine what would happen if the church of Jesus Christ

simply made it their aim to courageously comfort those in need rather than judge or belittle or argue or abandon them? Can you imagine what would happen if we would have the courage to listen to those who are struggling, those who are in pain, rather than be so quick to speak or offer empty platitudes or unwanted advice? How often do we play the role of Job's friends?

Readings for tomorrow: Job 24-25, Acts 10:9-48

July 6, 2021
Miraculous Gifts

Readings for today: Job 24-25, Acts 10:9-48

Greg Daniels posted a great set of questions that arise from today's reading. "In the early days of the Church, what we now call the miraculous gifts of apostleship, prophecy, tongues, healing, and miracles were common. A big question for the Church today is, have these gifts ceased to be (cessationism), or are they continuing (continuationism)? What do you think, do healings still occur? Do people still speak in tongues? Is there still new revelation by prophecy?"

For those who may be unfamiliar with the debate, there are those in the church today who argue the miraculous gifts of the Spirit have "ceased" (cessationism) because we have the Scriptures. Though the early church did have access to the Old Testament, they didn't have access to the gospels or the epistles from Paul, Peter, James, John, etc. as they were still being written. Therefore - as the argument goes - the Holy Spirit provided miraculous signs that "authenticated" the message being preached but once the Bible came into its full and complete form, the need for such signs was no longer necessary since Scripture provides all the authentication the gospel needs. On the flip side are those who believe the miraculous gifts still exist today. They point to the fact that the Bible itself never says the signs will cease and in fact includes the miraculous sign gifts right alongside the other, more ordinary spiritual gifts when it lists them out. So unless we are going to suggest the gifts of teaching or preaching or evangelism have ceased as well, we should remain exegetically consistent. Furthermore, "continuists" point to the prevalence of miraculous signs especially in areas around the world where the gospel is being introduced for the first time. There are many reports of miraculous healings, tongues, prophecies, etc.

To put my cards on the table, I am a continuationist. I believe all the signs are still in operation and I believe God grants such signs for the building up of the Body of Christ, to further the gospel, and to bring glory to Himself. We see all these dynamics on display in the story we read from Acts 10. Peter receives a vision from the Lord in response to a prayer from an unbelieving Gentile centurion. It's a new revelation regarding Gentile inclusion in the Kingdom of God. Peter goes to Cornelius and Cornelius welcomes him with open arms, asking him to preach. Peter preaches the gospel and hears what happens next...

"While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain." (Acts 10:44-48)

Note the Gentile believers were speaking in tongues, amazing the Jewish believers. Further, they understood that these new believers were "extolling God" meaning there was either an interpretation being given simultaneously so everyone could understand and celebrate what God had done or these new believers were actually speaking in known languages like what had happened on Pentecost. Peter then proceeds to baptize them all thus fulfilling the prophetic word he had received from the Lord.

It's a powerful passage that holds great relevance for us today. The eminent church historian, Philip Jenkins, has provocatively suggested that the church of the 21st century will be traditional in its ethics,

orthodox in its doctrine, supernatural in its power, and centered in the Global South. Africa will have over 1 billion Christians by 2050. Latin America over 650 million. Asia over 600 million. The growth of Christianity in North America will continue to slow to a crawl and will face steep decline in Europe. As the faces of Christianity continue to change, one will expect the influence of theologians and pastors and ministry leaders from these areas of the world to begin to dominate the landscape. No longer will the theological tone be set by the Reformation of the 16th century in Western Europe but by the Reformation taking place in Ethiopia, Uganda, China, Nigeria, Brazil and Mexico. This new movement is decidedly Pentecostal. It is boldly Charismatic. The preaching of the gospel in these countries is often accompanied by signs and wonders and miracles. It all sounds very “New Testament” to me and I’ve experienced it’s impact firsthand.

I have seen miraculous healings. I have witnessed a resurrection. I personally received the gift of tongues a few years ago during a time of prayer in Ethiopia. I have also witnessed abuses. Faith healers claiming to heal when they did not. False prophets claiming new revelation from the Lord that never comes true. People speaking publicly in worship in all sorts of tongues with no interpretation. This is where we have to test everything according to Scripture. God will not contradict Himself. He will not say one thing in His Word and another to a pastor or prophet. Again, the Bible is clear. The spiritual gifts are given to build up the Body of Christ. They are given to further the mission of the gospel. They are given to bring God all the glory. Any attempt to use the gifts to make our name great, to exploit the members of the Body of Christ, or to further our own kingdom on earth must be rejected forcefully. This is especially true when it comes to prosperity preaching or false prophecy which is so prevalent in our culture today.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 26-27, Acts 11

July 7, 2021
The Blessing of Being Powerless

Readings for today: Job 26-27, Acts 11

“Sheol is naked before God, and Abaddon has no covering. He stretches out the north over the void and hangs the earth on nothing. He binds up the waters in his thick clouds, and the cloud is not split open under them. He covers the face of the full moon and spreads over it his cloud. He has inscribed a circle on the face of the waters at the boundary between light and darkness. The pillars of heaven tremble and are astounded at his rebuke. By his power he stilled the sea; by his understanding he shattered Rahab. By his wind the heavens were made fair; his hand pierced the fleeing serpent. Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?” (Job 26:6-14)

Job is starting to come to the end of himself here. His rage is spent. His anger is losing steam. His frustrations and protests are starting to lack conviction as he remembers who it is he is contending with. God is all-powerful. Job is powerless. God is all-knowing. Job is ignorant. God is immense. Job is small. There is nothing hidden from God. Everything is hidden from Job in his ruined estate. As crazy as it sounds, I actually believe these verses represent a hinge point in the narrative. Job has reached the null point of his pain and suffering and still acknowledges the sovereignty of God. Yes, there will still be protests from Job but those are the final skirmishes in this battle he's been fighting for so many chapters. Job has come to a place of complete helplessness. Complete hopelessness. Complete despair. He has hit rock bottom which is where he will finally get his wish. He will meet God face to face.

I think about my own life. I think about how easy it is for me to rely on my own strength. My own resources. My own abilities. I am a blessed man. I have a wife of 25 years with whom I am falling more deeply in love. I have four wonderful children with whom I have a great relationship. I live among my extended family who I get to see on a regular basis. I have a job I absolutely love and a church family I am honored to serve. I get to work not only with gifted colleagues but dear friends. I've been invited into and given leadership positions in a variety of areas of passion both personally and professionally. I live in a beautiful state. A beautiful community. A beautiful home. My wife and I make plenty of money. My body is relatively strong. My mind is relatively sharp. My needs are few. But if I am honest, I must confess all these blessings make me forget about God.

Don't get me wrong, I think about God all the time but do I think about God rightly? Am I giving Him His due? Am I truly aware of His greatness and glory? Job's words here are deeply convicting. They remind me of the error of my ways. I too often take God for granted. I too often forget the great chasm that exists between us. Blissfully ignorant and enjoying the good things in life, I fail to recognize God's sovereign power. I fail to give Him the honor and thank Him for the blessings He has bestowed upon me. I too easily fall into the trap of assuming these things have come from my own work. My own labor. My own striving and success. I forget my utter powerlessness and helplessness and foolishness and smallness before the Lord.

As I think back over the course of my life, I have met God most profoundly in the most broken places. The places where I have no control. The places where I am most utterly hopeless and alone. God has made Himself known to me there and opened me up to all sorts of new possibilities. He has ministered to me in a special way and given me a deep experience of His faithful, abiding, steadfast love. It is when I am weak that I experience God's strength. It is when I am poor that I experience God's richest provision. It is when I am foolish that I seek God's wisdom. It is when I am anxious that I experience

the peace that passes my understanding. This is a paradox to be sure and yet it is essential to grasp if one is to follow Jesus. We must walk as He walked. We must live as He lived. We must embrace a life of utter dependence on our Heavenly Father, trusting Him to guide us and protect us and provide for us and, at the end of our lives, welcome us to our true home.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 28-30, Acts 12

July 9, 2021
Self-Examination

Readings for today: Job 31-32, Acts 13:1-25

Yesterday, I did something profoundly stupid. We planned a trip to hike a 14er in the area and I googled the shortest route from our condo to the trailhead. What I didn't take into account is the quality of the road. After all, I've driven on 4WD roads before to get to 14ers. However, this one was new. I had never been in this area before. All of it was an unknown. And did I mention it was dark? I am not a person who is easily rattled but driving to the top of Cinnamon pass in a Suburu Outback in the dark with my family just about shot my nerves. When we finally arrived at the trailhead - after having stopped near the top of the pass to let the sun rise - another hiker called what I'd done, "badass", but the look on his face told me he thought I was insane. He was right. There was nothing cool or courageous about it. It was not something to be celebrated. It was the act of a fool.

So why did I make the choices I made yesterday? What instincts drove me to continue on rather than wait? What impulses within pushed me to keep driving when the wise thing to do would have been to stop and turn around? As I've taken these thoughts before the Lord, He has shown me the depths of my pride. I was on a mission. The mission was to climb a 14er. I didn't want to turn back because I knew we wouldn't be able to find another route into the trailhead. I put the goal before the safety of my own family. My own need to succeed before the greater need to keep those I love safe. Now thankfully, we made it. Thankfully, we did summit Handies Peak. Thankfully, we found another route home that took us several more hours and thankfully, we received the unexpected blessing of seeing more of our beautiful state. One might say, "All's well that ends well" but I want to make sure I learn the lesson God is teaching me. You see, the whole point of this life is to draw so close to Jesus that I actually become like him. Not just in word or deed but in thought and attitude and even unconscious reaction. I want to get to a place where my natural reflex is to love like Jesus. To protect like Jesus. To put the needs of others before me like Jesus. Yesterday only shows me how far I still have to go.

In today's reading, Job lists several things that illustrate his godly character. He makes a covenant with his eyes not to undress another woman. He refuses to walk with falsehood or have any relationship with deceit. He treats his servants well because he sees in them the image of God. He takes care of the poor, the widow, and the orphan. He does not judge them for their disadvantaged state. He does not place his trust in his great wealth nor does he allow any potential idol in his heart to stand. He will not rejoice when his enemies fall. He will not take any pleasure in the demise of those who've attacked him. He has not exploited the land for his own personal gain. Job is such a godly man that the actions he lists come quite naturally to him. They are godly reflexes he's developed over time. How does that happen?

It begins with a simple, yet profound acknowledgement. God sees everything. He sees what we do. He hears what we say. He knows what we think. He sees our conscious as well as our unconscious. The id, the ego, and the superego are not mysteries to Him. He knows our reflexes and our natural responses before we know them. He knows why we react the way we do. He knows what happens in the back of our brains as well as the front. He sees the unformed places of our hearts. He knows our secret thoughts and desires. He knows the fears and insecurities that drive us. He sees all. He knows all. And Job understands this great truth.

Job also understands God's great love. Though never really mentioned in the book, only a person fully secure in his/her relationship with God could say the things Job says. Only a person fully convinced of their friendship with God would ever believe they deserved an answer from Him. Job believes God is

bound to him on some level just as he is bound to God. Job believes God owes him an answer on some level because Job has lived his entire life in humble worship and service to Him. And the great news of this book is that God answers Job's call. Job is not ignored. He is not dismissed. He is not abandoned. God speaks. God answers. God ultimately affirms His relationship with His "servant Job" and reaffirms His opinion of him, "that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil." (Job 1:8)

When one understands the depths of God's omniscience and His unfailing love, one is set free from ever trying to hide from Him. One is set free to bring all of oneself before the Lord and engage in the process of self-examination in the security of an eternal relationship with Him. You see, the closer I come to Jesus, the more my sin is revealed. The closer I come to His purity, the more my impurities show up. The closer I come to His holiness, the more aware of my unholiness I become. Without a relationship with God, I would be driven to depression and despair. But because I know God loves me with an everlasting love. Because I have confidence that nothing can separate me from God's love. I am free to bring even the darkest places of my heart before Him. I am free to lay down all of my shame. Through the Holy Spirit, I can courageously confront my fears and insecurities. I can expose the utter depths of my sin to the light of His grace and be healed. Transformed. Made more into the image of Christ.

The process of self-examination is an essential part of the Christian journey. The more we know ourselves, the more we know God. The more we know God, the more we know ourselves. Let the Spirit guide you. Trust the Spirit's work within you. Stop running. Stop hiding. Stop trying to pretend you are something you are not before the Lord. Trust His love for you. Trust His compassion towards you. Trust the sufficiency of His mercy and grace. You are safe in His arms. Safe to be who you are, warts and all. God loves you for who you are and He loves you too much to leave you there. He will do His transformative work within you if you will but let Him. If you ever have any doubts, just ask Job.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 33-34, Acts 13:26-53

July 10, 2021
The First Missionaries

Readings for today: Job 33-34, Acts 13:26-53

It is amazing to read about Paul's first missionary journey. Coming on the heels of persecution in Jerusalem which cost James his life and put Peter in prison, the church in Antioch responds to the call of the Spirit to send out missionaries to proclaim the good news of the gospel. Barnabus and Paul are chosen after a lengthy time of prayer and fasting and worship. They travel from Antioch to Cyprus to Perga which is a gateway city to the region of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). From there, they hit the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. All told, they travel around 1500 miles in about two years before returning to report the great news that many Gentiles are turning to faith in Jesus Christ!

Three things to note that will become paradigmatic for future missionary endeavors, including those in our own day and age. First, the bold proclamation of the gospel. Paul was utterly convinced God had raised Jesus from the dead and that this was the fulfillment of all the promises given to Israel. Many have argued that Paul's conversion represented a radical break with his prior Pharisaism. On the contrary! Paul himself argues that the resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of all he believed. "And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus..." (Acts 13:32-33) Everything changed for Paul that day he met the Risen Christ outside of Damascus. He was confronted with the truth that everything he believed about Israel had now come true in Jesus Christ. Yahweh had indeed raised His Son from the dead in vindication of everything Jesus had taught. Far from being an enemy of the Jewish faith, Jesus was the fulfillment! And Paul's zealous passion for the faith of his fathers now would make him the greatest evangelist the world has ever known.

Second, the proclamation of the gospel was confirmed by signs and wonders. Wherever Barnabus and Paul went, the sick were healed. Demons were cast out. People were set free from oppression. As we read yesterday, Paul showed no fear in confronting powerful witch-doctors like Bar-Jesus. He called down God's judgment on the man and struck him blind. This was not an act of self-promotion. In fact, as we'll read next week, when the people of Lystra attempt to worship Paul and Barnabus because of the miracle they performed in making a lame man walk, they tore their garments. They refused to let it happen. They assured the people they were not gods but simply ordinary men serving the One True God, the maker of heaven and earth. No, the point of all the miracles and signs and wonders was to bring people to saving faith. To confirm the truth of the gospel they preached.

Finally, persecution. No matter where Paul and Barnabus went, they faced opposition. From the pagans in power like Bar-Jesus to the Jews who refused to receive their message. They were beaten. They were stoned. They were attacked and left for dead. The Word of God is a double-edged sword and it stirred the hearts of those who listened. Some received the good news with glad hearts and came to faith. Others perceived it as a threat and lashed out. There is no such thing as being neutral when it comes to Jesus!

Friends, this same dynamic is being played out the world over even today. My friends in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, and Djibouti all share similar testimonies. They boldly proclaim the gospel in villages, towns, and cities where it has never been heard. Their preaching is often accompanied by many signs and wonders and miracles. The sick are healed. The demon-oppressed set free. The dead are raised to new life. But these men and women face extreme persecution as well. Beaten. Stabbed.

Shot. Imprisoned. Left for dead. Their families are attacked. Their livelihoods threatened. Some of them even lose their lives for the sake of the Kingdom. And yet, they are “filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 13:52)

God is not done! Despite what you may hear, He is still very much on the move! He will not rest or relent until the whole world hears the good news of the gospel! This is His will! This is His plan! And to this great end, He calls His church! This is the reason we exist! Not for ourselves but for the sake of the world! May we understand and embrace our calling to be missionaries in our communities and to the very ends of the earth!

Readings for tomorrow: None

July 12, 2021
Feeling Small

Readings for today: Job 35-40, Acts 14

A few days ago, I summited Mt. Sneffels. It's one of 54 "fourteeners" (peaks rising above 14,000') in Colorado and is known as the "Queen of the San Juans" because of the amazing views of the surrounding peaks and valleys. Those who know me well know how much I love hiking and climbing. Sneffels was peak number 15 for me and I've climbed several others multiple times. None of them are easy. In order to summit a 14er, one has to hit the trail very early. Sometimes before the sun comes up. You typically ascend thousands of feet so your legs take a beating. Sometimes there's a nice trail, sometimes not. Depending the route, you can be dangerously exposed both to the weather or a potential fall. Many of them are over 10 miles round trip. You race the clock to beat the afternoon storms before they roll in. But the payoff is definitely worth it. Standing on the summit makes you feel like you're on top of the world.

It's also makes you feel so very small. I thought about these words from Job when I got to the top of Sneffels. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4-7) It was a picture-perfect day. Not a cloud in the sky. I could see for miles and still my view was so limited. I could not see the foundations of the mountain on which I stood. I could not see to the end of the green valleys that stretched out before me. I could never determine the measurements of peaks that ranged all around me. Only God knows these things. He laid the foundations of the earth. He stretched out His line and determined the height of each of the 54 14,000' peaks as well as the 637 13,000' peaks and the more than 1,500 12,000' peaks. God laid the cornerstone for each and every one. He sunk the base of Mt. Sneffels deep into the earth so it would never tremble or fall. Reflecting on His omnipotence as I stood surveying the vastness of His creation took my breath away.

And then God showed me something even greater. "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it...Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right?" (Job 40:2, 8) As humbled as I was by the creative power of God, I was even more humbled by His righteousness. His holiness. His purity. The chasm that exists between the Triune God in all His splendor and majesty and glory and a weak and ruined sinner like me dwarfs any mountain I could ever climb. No matter how hard I try, I can never ascend to God. No matter how far I walk, I can never draw close to God. No matter how early I rise, there simply isn't enough time for me to work out my own salvation. Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Shall a sinner like me question God Himself? Am I that foolish that I would put God in the wrong so that I might be right? If I am honest, the answer is yes. I am that foolish. In fact, my foolishness knows no bounds. I contend against God daily in thought, word, and deed. I often act as if I know best. I believe down deep that I am the master of my own fate, the captain of my own destiny. And when things go sideways in my life, my first instinct is often to complain to God. To act as I've been wronged or put out or somehow unfairly treated. Frankly, I am more than willing to condemn God in order to justify myself.

Thankfully, God isn't done with me and He wasn't done with me that morning on Sneffels either. He still had yet more to share. Yes, His power is breathtakingly immense. Yes, His righteousness makes me fall on my face before Him. Like Job, "I am of small account; what shall I answer? I lay my hand on my mouth." (Job 40:4) Like the great prophet Isaiah, "I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I

dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips..." (Isaiah 6:5) And yet, God loves me still. Tears came to my eyes as I thought about the vastness of God's love. It is wider than the valleys that lay before me. It is higher than the mountain peaks that surrounded me. It is truly measureless, boundless, infinite in scope. Despite my own limitations, I know there is an end to the earth. Given the right instruments and training, I know I could find the foundations of the mountains. I could stretch out a line across the valleys. I could even weigh the planet on a scale. Not so with God's love. I cannot fathom it's reach. I cannot grasp it's heights or depths, it's length or it's breadth. It's logic escapes me. It's faithfulness astounds me. There simply is nothing like it in all creation. And that, friends, is the wonder of the gospel. God hikes the heavens to come to us! God climbs every mountain and crosses every valley to get to us! God bridges every gulf and every chasm in order to save us! You are not small in His eyes! You are not insignificant to Him! He loves you with an everlasting love and He will allow nothing in all creation to separate you from Him!

Readings for tomorrow: Job 41-42, Psalm 1, Acts 15

July 13, 2021
Repentance

Readings for today: Job 41-42, Psalm 1, Acts 15

Job's words hit me hard today. "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.' I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:2-6)

"I know you can do all things and no purpose of yours can be thwarted." While I acknowledge this truth intellectually, I too often live as if everything depended on me. One of the weaknesses God has been exposing in me lately is my lack of dependence on Him. The sin of self-sufficiency. I get so wrapped up in what I am doing. So confident in my own wisdom and strength and ability. And then things go sideways. Expectations are not met. Boundaries are crossed. Plans get waylaid. Disappointment and discouragement sets in. I start to believe the lie that somehow God's plan has failed. Somehow God has let me down. Nothing could be further from the truth.

"Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?" Too often it is me. I utter what I do not understand. I speak of things too wonderful for me which I do not know. God says, "Listen, and I will speak. I will question you and you will answer." But I don't listen enough. I don't wait enough. I don't sit in silence enough. Instead, I rush on ahead. Overconfident in my course. Assuming I have the blessing of God on my life. I am impatient. I am headstrong. I am full of pride. If I am totally honest, I am also a little afraid. I don't want to slow down. Slowing down and sitting in God's presence means having to answer some uncomfortable questions. Slowing down and reflecting means coming to grips with some uncomfortable truths. About myself. About my attitudes. My thoughts. My actions. I don't want to slow down because I am afraid of God's questions. I am afraid to have to give an answer for why I spend my time the way I do. Why I spend my money the way I do. Why I love the things I love and serve the things I serve.

You see, I am too much like Job's friends in this way. I've been professionally trained in theology by some of the most brilliant theologians at one of the top seminaries in the world. But too often I neglect the weightier matters of acting justly, walking humbly, and loving mercy. Too often I refuse to let the Spirit re-order the loves and desires of my heart. I like to hold God at a distance. I want Him close but not too close if you know what I mean. For so many years, I settled for knowing about God. I heard His Word preached. I heard those around me talk about Him. They described Him as if He were real but I wasn't sure I believed it. Then I met God face to face and everything changed. There simply is no substitute for God's presence. It is a consuming fire that burns even as it purifies. To this day, when I stop long enough to truly contemplate God's beauty and glory and splendor and majesty, I fall on my face in worship. I despise myself. All my trophies. All my achievements. All my successes. Everything I might hold onto for self-esteem, affirmation, and identity turns to dust and ash before the Lord as He strips me bare. My only response is repentance. Godly sorrow over my ruined state. Deep joy and thankfulness for what Christ has done for me.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 2-3, Acts 16:1-15

July 14, 2021
Vision

Readings for today: Psalms 2-3, Acts 16:1-15

I will be leading an elder retreat in about a month for our church family. The focus will be seeking God's vision for the next season in our life together. This past year, we witnessed the successful completion of a vision God gave us several years ago of a licensed Christian counseling center focused on serving the suburban poor and those on Medicaid. It's been a beautiful journey. One I am so thankful to be part of! God moved powerfully on the hearts of His people as they caught His vision for what could be if we eliminated our church debt. Now we stand on the cusp of yet another journey and to be honest, I am not sure where it will take us. What will our church look like post-COVID? How will we continue to fulfill the Great Commission and live out the Great Commandment? What does life together look like when it is mediated in both a physical as well as virtual environment? These are the questions I am taking to the Lord right now.

I imagine the Apostle Paul faced similar questions along the way. Yes, his context was radically different. Yes, his "journey" involved walking miles and miles as he went from city to city preaching the gospel and planting churches. But in many ways his challenge was the same. He clearly sought God's vision for his ministry. He sought God's direction for his life. He fundamentally understood that unless the Lord built the house, all his labor would be in vain. Following the will of the Spirit is never a straight line. At least not in my experience. He zigs and He zags. He sometimes takes you two steps forward and one step back. There are these amazing twists to the journey that only make sense upon reflection.

Consider what happens in our reading today. "So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily. And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them." (Acts 16:5-10) Paul, Silas, and Timothy carry the gospel to cities in the regions of Syria and Cilicia. They experience great success in places like Derbe and Lystra. The churches there are strengthened in their faith. They grow in numbers. It must have been so exciting for them! But then a door is shut in Asia. Another door closes in Bithynia. We don't know the details but it must have been disappointing to Paul and his team on some level. Perhaps the people didn't respond well to the message? Perhaps the persecution was particularly intense? Perhaps Paul and his team simply felt a strong check in their spirit? After all, Luke (the author of the Book of Acts) is pretty specific that it was the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Jesus that prevented them from going where they originally had planned. I can imagine them pulling into Troas feeling frustrated by the delays. Disheartened by the doors that closed in their faces. Perhaps some doubt began to creep in regarding the future of their trip. Little do they know this was all part of God's grand design!

My wife is fond of saying, "Sometimes you have to go from point A to point B so that you can see point C. You cannot necessarily see point C from point A though this may be where God wants you to end up. You have to trust Him for every step of the journey." I think Paul would agree! He had to face those disappointments in Asia and Bithynia in order to prepare him to receive the vision of the man

from Macedonia. Imagine how different the world would be if Paul had not brought the gospel to Europe? You and I may not be saved today!

So here's the question...are you seeking God's vision for your life? And are you willing to let Him both open and close doors? Are you willing to let Him lead and guide your steps even if they don't always lead in a straight line? Do you trust Him for provision and protection, strength and wisdom along the way? Do you take your successes and failures, your victories and defeats, your joys and disappointments and lay them at His feet? Most importantly, do you rest in His deep, steadfast, loyal, abiding love?

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 4-6, Acts 16:16-40

July 15, 2021
Being before Doing

Readings for today: [Psalms 4-6, Acts 16:16-40](#)

I love the words from the Psalms this morning. They are good for my soul. They slow me down. They re-orient my thoughts. They re-frame my attitudes. They re-order the priorities of my day. You see, I too often fall into the trap of “doing” before “being.” I too often try to walk in God’s way without first abiding in His love. If I am not careful and intentional, I can quickly turn into a Pharisee. God’s will becomes just another thing to strive after on my checklist. I start chasing self-righteousness rather than simply open my heart to receive the righteousness God offers me in Jesus Christ.

“In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.” (Psalm 4:8)

“But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you. Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me. But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy, and spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may exult in you. For you bless the righteous, O Lord; you cover him with favor as with a shield.” (Psalm 5:7-8, 11-12)

“Turn, O Lord, deliver my life; save me for the sake of your steadfast love.” (Psalm 6:4)

God alone makes me dwell in safety. My life is not my own. My security is not mine to maintain. My safety is not my chief concern. My future is not in my hands. God alone holds me in the palm of His hands and He alone provides the rest and peace and comfort I need. God alone is the answer to all my anxieties and fears. It is only through His abundant, steadfast, loyal, faithful love that I have access into His house. His home. His presence. God’s love - nothing else - provides the invitation. So I enter His temple with holy reverence and awe and fear and wonder at the miracle of His great love for me. As I bow down in surrender to receive His love, He leads me in righteousness. As a dear friend and fellow elder in the Lord once shared with me, “Doug, you cannot walk in God’s will unless you first walk in His love.” To put it another way, my “doing” for Jesus must flow from my “being” with Jesus. Life with God cannot be reverse-engineered. In God’s presence, there is fullness of joy. In God’s presence, there is peace that passes all understanding. In God’s presence, there is excitement and energy and exultation. These are the blessings God has reserved for the righteous, those He covers with His favor. These are the blessings I long for in my own life, in the lives of those I love, and in the lives of those who call the church I serve home.

Readings for tomorrow: [Psalms 7-9, Acts 17:1-15](#)

July 16, 2021
Imago Dei

Readings for today: [Psalms 7-9, Acts 17:1-15](#)

“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.” (Psalm 8:3-8)

Have you ever wondered what it means to be a person? A human being? What is it that sets us apart? What is it that makes us unique? Psalm 8 reminds us of one of the greatest, most fundamental truths in all of Scripture. We are made in the image of God. We are given a position in creation just below the angelic host. We are crowned with glory and honor. And we are given charge over all God has made. Just sit with that thought for a moment. Let it sink in. You are a glorious creature. Worthy of honor because of the image you bear. Irreducibly complex. Unique in every way. Fearfully and wonderfully made by God’s own hands. To get an idea of just how deep this goes, listen to how noted sociologist, Christian Smith, defines personhood, “By person I mean a conscious, reflexive, embodied, self-transcending center of subjective experience, durable identity, moral commitment, and social communication who-as the efficient cause of his or her own responsible actions and interactions-exercises complex capacities for agency and intersubjectivity in order to develop and sustain his or her own incommunicable self in loving relationships with other personal selves and with the nonpersonal world.” If that sounds confusing - and I certainly had to read it several times myself - check out how Smith attempts to visualize what he has just said...



**HIGHEST
ORDER
CAPACITIES:**

**CREATING
CAPACITIES:**

**SECONDARY
EXPERIENCE
CAPACITIES:**

**PRIMARY
EXPERIENCE
CAPACITIES:**

**EXISTENCE
CAPACITIES:**

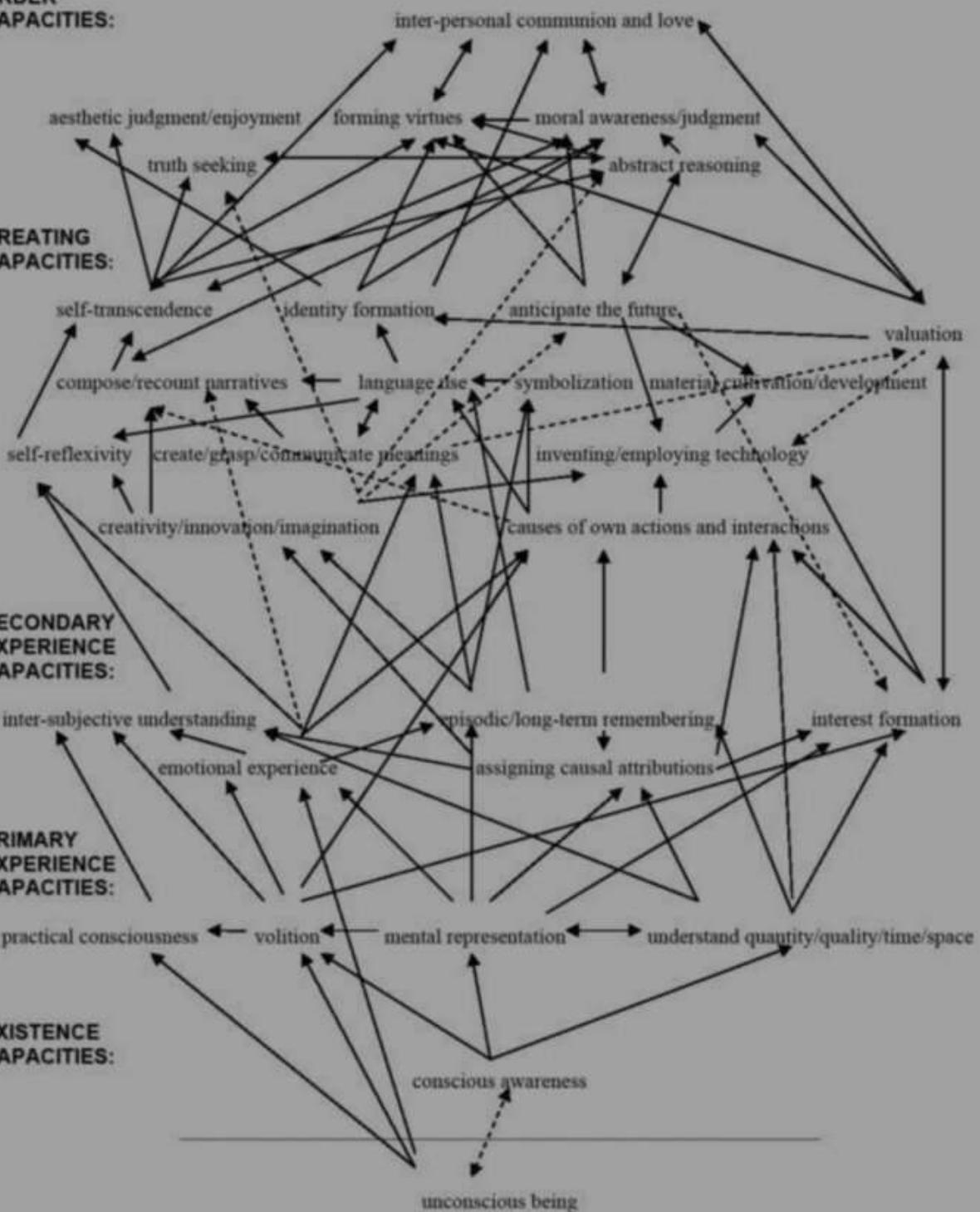


FIGURE 2. Upwardly emergent and downwardly dependent human capacities.

Crazy, right?! And yet it illustrates the incredible depth and beauty and complexity of the human creature. It also gives us a window into why human life can be so confusing at times. After all, who can discern the heart of such a creature? Not even the individual themselves can plumb the depths of their own personhood much less the personhood of others. So what do we do? We settle. We shrink our horizons. We “flatten out” our own personhood or the personhood of those around us. We treat people far too simplistically, even two-dimensionally, and we fail to see them as God created them. This is the tragedy of sin and it results in alienation. Sin alienates us from ourselves. Sin alienates us from one another. Sin alienates us from all God has made. Most especially, sin alienates us from God Himself. In our alienated state, we become confused. We lose sight of the One who made us. Our view of His image becomes warped, corrupted, obscured. The Bible says it is as if we are looking at a cloudy mirror. All we can see is a dim reflection. It’s like squinting in a fog or peering through a mist as one translator put it. Left to our own imaginations, we try to create our own image of ourselves. But it never quite works out. It never quite satisfies. Selfishness takes over. We become enslaved to our appetites, desires, passions. We seek to use others for our own gain. Creation itself becomes a resource to exploit for our own ends. And the creature who was made a little lower than the angels exchanges their glorious birthright for more demonic ends. Seeds of distrust are sown. Divisions harden. Hatred rises. Anger takes over. Violence breaks out. We are lost among the ruins of our existence. Doomed to wander in the shadowlands of a world undone by human sin and strife. This is humanity’s heartbreak story. One that gets passed down to every generation.

But what if the Bible is true? What if what it says about humanity is true? What would happen if we could recover our sight? See ourselves and one another for who we truly are? Miraculous image-bearers of God Himself? Handcrafted masterpieces made after His likeness? Icons of God’s glory and honor in the world? When we look out at the universe God has made, we see the stars in the nighttime sky. We see incredible vistas spreading before us from the top of mountains. We hear the rushing of the rivers. The crash of ocean waves on the shore. We watch in wonder the coming of the rain and the refreshing of the earth. The rising and the setting of the sun. When we stop and consider all God has made, it is indeed marvelous to consider that we are the crown of such a creation! The image-bearer designed to reign and rule in God’s Name and for God’s glory in the world. Furthermore, we are God’s stewards given charge to care for His creation. God has given all things into our hands. He has entrusted all He has made into our care. What a glorious, yet sobering thought! And God has given us all the capacity we need and the resources we need and the gifts we need to serve Him well in that role.

So how do we bring an end to our alienation? We embrace the love God offers us in Jesus Christ. Through Christ’s death and resurrection, God has torn down every dividing wall of hostility that exists and reconciled all things to Himself. In Christ, we have peace with God. Peace with ourselves. Peace with those around us. Peace with our world. In Christ, the image of God is restored. The fog lifts. The mist fades. The dim reflection comes into full view.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 10-12, Acts 17:16-34

July 17, 2021
Holding onto Hope

Readings for today: Psalms 10-12, Acts 17:16-34

“The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord’s throne is in heaven; his eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man. The Lord tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence. Let him rain coals on the wicked; fire and sulfur and a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup. For the Lord is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face.” (Psalm 11:4-7)

I confess there are times when I lose heart. Times when I look at the world around me and feel overwhelmed by all the injustice. All the pain. All the suffering. All the heartbreak. All the fear. All the evil. The cumulative weight of human sin breaks the scales. It is simply incalculable. It is immeasurable. Too vast for me to even imagine. I’ve looked into the eyes of those who’ve suffered terrible abuse or violence or disease or life-threatening poverty. I’ve looked into the eyes of mothers holding out their babies to me, begging me to take them with me. I’ve looked into the vacant eyes of fathers, lying on a roadside wasted by drugs. I’ve spent time with the homeless and listened to their heartbreakingly stories. I’ve felt the anger of friends of color who’ve been victimized by persistent racism or classism. I’ve seen the injustice of a broken justice system firsthand as a chaplain in a maximum security prison. Truly, humanity’s inhumanity is more than I can bear.

I confess there are times when I lose heart. Times when I look at those I love and live among and feel overwhelmed by the burdens they carry. So much anxiety. So much fear. So much chasing after the wind. We are a brittle people. Fragile and easily hurt. There is so much that divides us. So much that tears at the fabric of our life together. So many powerful forces threaten to drive us apart and in many cases they’ve succeeded. I grieve when I listen to some of my friends. I grieve when I see the hatred they post online. I grieve at the words that are said that cannot be taken back. I grieve when relationships are cut off, people are ghosted, and love is lost in a sea of disappointment and anger and frustration. Truly, the inhumanity with which we often treat one another is more than I can bear.

I confess there are times when I lose heart. Times I look in the mirror and see the depths of my own sin. So much pride. So much selfish ambition and vain conceit. So much entitlement. So much self-righteousness. So much fear and doubt and anxiety and pain. I too chase after the wind. I too am a brittle person. I too am fragile and weak and easily hurt. I’ve taken shots I did not earn. I’ve been the subject of rumors and gossip that was both untrue and unfair. These things hurt. They wound. But I am not just a victim. I am a perpetrator as well. I’ve said things I deeply regret. I’ve acted in ways that cause me deep shame. I’ve betrayed. I’ve wounded. I’ve hated or despised my brother or sister. I’ve participated in systems of injustice. I am as much a contributor to the brokenness of this world as anyone. The weight of my sin is incalculable. And my ability to sin seems only surpassed by my ability to rationalize away my sin. Truly, my own inhumanity is more than I can bear.

If I am not careful, I can easily be driven to despair. If I do not stay close to Christ, I will be crushed under the weight of it all. Thankfully, the words of the Psalmist give me hope this morning. They are there to encourage me to look beyond myself. Beyond my own unrighteousness. Beyond the unrighteousness of those around me. Beyond the unrighteousness of this world. To the only One who is truly righteous. The Lord. The One who is even now in His temple. The One who is even now sitting on His throne. The One who reigns and rules from heaven. The One who sees all and knows all. The One who rewards the righteous and calls the wicked to account. The One who will not let sin persist forever. The

One who binds the evil one from enacting his calamities on the earth. The One who controls time and space. God is on His throne. He reigns! He rules! This is our only hope in this life or the next. God is even now working to bring about His will on earth as it is in heaven. He is bringing about His will in my life, in the lives of those I love, and in the community in which I live for His Name's sake and His own glory.

So my prayer this morning is simply this...Father, help me remember. Help me keep my eyes fixed on Christ. Help me to trust that no matter what I may experience, You have never left Your holy temple. You will never abdicate Your throne. You remain sovereign over all. Your eyes see. You are even now testing humanity. The righteous along with the unrighteous. Your righteous judgment is coming. And if I cling to Christ, I will see You face to face. Amen.

Readings for tomorrow: None

July 19, 2021
Godly Contentment

Readings for today: [Psalms 13-18, Acts 18](#)

Recently, a friend asked me for the secret to godly contentment. This is a person who struggles to find peace. They are anxious and afraid much of the time. They catastrophize, frequently spinning out only the worst case scenarios. They are pretty negative, often waiting for the other shoe to drop. They assume the worst rather than the best of themselves and others. They are at war with those closest to them. In fact, it was because of a recent blow-up that they found themselves in my office.

I walked them through Psalm 16 and asked them to reflect on a series of questions.

“Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Lord, “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.” Do you believe God is safe? Do you believe His door is always open to you? Do you believe you can run to Him when you are in trouble or when you are anxious and afraid? Do you believe God wants only your good?

“As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight. The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips.” Look at the people around you. Look at the people you have surrounded yourself with. Are they godly or ungodly? Are they content or are they anxious? Are they selfless or selfish? Does being with them bring your soul delight or sorrow? Does being with them make you feel closer to God or further away?

“The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.” Is God enough? Is He sufficient? Does He satisfy? When you consider what’s most important in your life, is God at the top of the list? Is spending time with Him your greatest joy? Is worshipping Him your greatest desire? When you look at your life, do you see evidence of His blessing? Do you live from a place of gratitude for all He has done for you? All that you’ve been given? All that He has entrusted into your hands?

“I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.” Do you seek the Lord’s wisdom when you make decisions? Do you spend time in prayer when you are anxious and afraid? Do you commit yourself to follow God’s ways no matter how crazy it may sound or foolish it may appear in the eyes of the world? Do you follow Christ no matter what the cost?

“Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” (Psalm 16:1-11) Gladness comes when we embrace the promises of God for our life. Security comes when we commit to walking in God’s ways. Abundant life flows when we listen to Him. Fullness of joy becomes ours when we dwell in His presence. It is ONLY at God’s right hand that we find the eternal pleasure our hearts long for.

How would you answer these questions? As St. Augustine once said, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.” Our hearts are never content. Never at peace. Never at rest until they find their rest in Christ. Abiding with Him. Intentionally placing ourselves at His right hand. Dwelling His presence. Walking in His ways. Seeking His face. Obeying His will. This is the only way to satisfy the deepest cravings of hearts.

Readings for tomorrow: [Psalms 19-22, Acts 19](#)

July 20, 2021
Following the Way

Readings for today: Psalms 19-22, Acts 19

Have you ever found yourself longing for revival? Not just an emotional high or spiritual mountaintop but something much deeper? Something on a soul-level? Have you ever found yourself longing for wisdom? Not just intellectual knowledge but the deep wisdom that flows from knowing yourself as God knows you? Have you ever found yourself longing for joy? Not just temporary happiness or pleasure but a deep, transcendent level of joy that is in no way dependent on life's circumstances? Have you ever found yourself longing for purity? Longing to be set free from destructive patterns? Longing to be set free from the power of sin? Longing to see rather than stumble blindly through life?

What if I told you I had found the way? What if I told you the way was open to anyone who would seek it? What if I told you there were no pre-conditions you had to meet? No prerequisites you had to take? No hoops you had to jump through in order to join? What if I told you those who followed the way had found something more precious than gold? Sweeter than honey? And those who kept to the way, those who persevered to the end, were given a great reward? Would you consider it? Would you follow it?

What would you be willing to sacrifice for such a life? What would you be willing to give up for such a gift? Would you give up your pride? Give up control? Would you surrender yourself wholly and completely to it? Would you commit yourself - body and soul - to following it? Listen to these words from Psalm 19 again...

“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.” (Psalm 19:7-11)

All the promises of God are available to those who would seek Him. All the gifts of God are given to those who seek to follow Him with their whole hearts. Yes, the way requires surrender. Yes, the way requires relinquishment. Yes, the way requires sacrificing all that we are so that we might gain all God has for us. But the reward is worth it! The riches God has stored up for us in Christ are beyond comprehension! As Jim Elliott - a missionary martyred for his faith - once said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 23-24, Acts 20:1-16

July 21, 2021
Psalm 23

Readings for today: Psalms 23-24, Acts 20:1-16

I love Psalm 23. It's always been one of my favorite passages of Scriptures. It was one of the first I memorized and I find myself coming back to it over and over again when I am anxious or afraid. The words are deeply comforting. This is true not just for me. I cannot tell you the number of people who turn to these verses when they are hurting or in pain or grieving the loss of a loved ones. There's a reason it's a favorite at funerals even for those who have only a casual relationship with the church. There's just something about it that speaks to the deepest places of our souls.

Several years ago, I had the privilege of spending time with the widow of one of my mentors. A man by the name of Bud Sparling. Bud and Carol were some of the most amazing people I have ever met. Their love for Jesus and for each other was legendary. They dedicated their lives to serving the Lord and His people. They traveled the world bringing encouragement and hope to missionaries. They served the church I currently pastor with great faithfulness and devotion. One day I got a call from Carol. She had a terminal illness and asked me to come by to discuss her funeral arrangements. I was happy to go and spend such precious, sacred time with her. As we talked, she told me about a recent dream God had given her. In her dream, she saw her husband Bud lying, eyes closed, smile on his face, in a lush, green meadow. Beside him ran a small river filled with the clearest water you could ever see. The sky was a deep, divine blue. As she walked towards him, Bud opened his eyes and said, "Honey, it's better than we ever imagined." Then he patted the grass next to him and said, "There's plenty of room for the both of us." Tears come to my eyes even now as I think about Carol sharing this dream with me. It was a precious gift.

This is the picture I have in my mind when I think of heaven. Lush mountain meadows. Clear mountain streams. Not a cloud in the sky. Plenty of room for all those who follow the Good Shepherd. Plenty of room for all those who hear and know His voice. But life this side of heaven is lived in the valley of the shadow. Here we are constantly haunted by the specter of death. Fear and anxiety threaten us on every side. The only hope we have is that the Good Shepherd never leaves our side. He walks with us in the valley of the shadow of death just as he once walked with us in the cool of the day in the Garden of Eden. He is always with us. His rod and staff are there to comfort us and protect us. He prepares a feast for us in the presence of our enemies. A feast of victory. A feast of celebration for death and evil and sin have been overcome! It's a feast honoring the Good Shepherd who lays His life down for His sheep.

Friends, the key to walking this road is to keep our eyes on the Good Shepherd. Don't lose sight of Him! Don't let the noise of this world drown out His voice! Don't give His enemy a foothold! If you take your eyes off the Good Shepherd, you will find yourself jumping at every shadow. You'll find yourself trembling at every strange sound. You'll look for enemies around every corner. The devil under every rock. Don't let fear, anxiety, doubts, insecurities, or a sense of scarcity rob you of the hope and confidence you have in Christ! These things are real to be sure but don't give them more power than they deserve! It is Christ who has won the victory! It is Christ who secures your place in His eternal Kingdom! It is Christ who prepares a place for you even now in His eternal home! It is Christ who offers you goodness and mercy all the days of your life! Christ does all these things and more for those He calls His own. Place your trust in Him today!

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 25-27, Acts 20:17-38

July 22, 2021
The Path of Righteousness

Readings for today: Psalms 25-27, Acts 20:17-38

Many years ago, my wife and I had the opportunity to take a trek through the jungles in northern Rwanda to see the mountain gorillas in their natural habitat. Early in the morning, the runners go out to find the more than twenty pods of gorillas in the forest. They radio back to the guides who then take small groups of people into the forest to spend about an hour with the gorillas. There are no trails. The path has to be hacked out of the wildness by machete. Armed guards come with you to make sure you stay safe in case you run across elephants or Cape buffalo. After about two hours, it became clear to us that our guides were a bit lost. The gorillas were not where they were supposed to be. The section of the forest we found ourselves in was not familiar to them. So they wisely stopped, reconnected with the runners from the morning, and then began hacking out a new path in a new direction that eventually put us right in the middle of a gorilla pod where we got to spend the next two hours watching them eat and play. It was a once in a lifetime experience.

I thought about that trip when I read these words from Psalm 25:10 this morning... “All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.” (Psalm 25:10) All God’s ways are marked by steadfast love and faithfulness. All God’s ways are marked by grace and peace. A great test of whether I am on the righteous path or not is to evaluate where I stand in relation to these things. Are my “paths” marked by anxiety or fear? Are my paths marked by anger or outrage? Are my paths marked by scorn or ridicule or disdain? Are my paths marked by hatred and violence? Or are my paths marked by unresolved hurt or pain? Are my paths marked by unforgiveness and toxicity? Are my paths marked by foolishness or pride? You see, if I am not careful I can easily stray off the path. I am prone to wander off the trail Christ has marked out for me. And when I do, I invite all kinds of heartache and heartburn into my life. But if I keep my eyes on Jesus. If I commit to walking in His footsteps. Doing life His way. Loving those He loves. Serving those He serves. Then my days will be marked by grace and peace. Steadfast love and faithfulness. For this is where ALL the paths of the Lord lead.

Friends, God walks in steadfast love. God’s love is kind and patient. It does not envy or boast. It is not arrogant or rude. God’s love keeps no record of wrongs. It does not grow irritable or resentful. It never rejoices in wrongdoing or falsehood or deceit but always rejoices with the truth. God’s love believes all things. Hopes all things. Endures all things. God’s love never fails. And those who commit to walk in God’s ways should expect to experience such love themselves as well as have a desire to extend such love to others.

God walks in faithfulness. He never leaves or abandons or betrays or walks away from us. He is never unavailable, never closed off, never dismissive of our concerns. He is faithful to the faithless. A father to the fatherless. A savior for sinners. And those who commit to walk in God’s ways will also lead lives marked by such faithfulness. They will trod these same paths. They will find themselves taking the hard, narrow way of continual self-denial that leads to glory rather than the easy, wide way of self-gratification that leads to destruction. In short, as we read yesterday, they will find themselves being led on paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.

Sadly, the reality is I am prone to wander. I too easily lose sight of where I am going. I too quickly abandon the paths of righteousness in order to blaze a trail on my own. When I do, I end up crashing through the bamboo. Bushwhacking through the wilderness. Getting lost in uncharted territory. I too

easily place my trust in blind guides. I too often listen to foolish voices. I too often follow faithless leaders. This includes myself for I am just as blind and foolish and faithless as the next person! Thankfully, the good news of the gospel is that when I confess my sin, God is faithful and just to forgive me, take me by the hand, and lead me back on His paths.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 28-30, Acts 21:1-16

July 23, 2021
Gratitude

Readings for today: [Psalms 28-30, Acts 21:1-16](#)

What has the Lord done for you? Can you count His blessings? Can you see the miraculous ways in which He has provided? Can you measure the lavish riches of His grace? Yesterday, I ran across a quote from a brilliant theologian named J.I. Packer about knowing God. He writes, “We are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs it. The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know about God. Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfold, as it were, with no sense of direction, and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.” I found myself thinking a lot about that quote as I read through the Psalms assigned for today. It is because the Psalmist knows God that he can call on God. It’s because the Psalmist has confidence in God’s steadfast love and faithfulness that he can cry out to God. It’s because the Psalmist truly trusts God that he can present his needs before Him. Perhaps most importantly, it’s because the Psalmist sees how much God has done for him that he lives his life with a deep sense of gratitude.

I cannot begin to tell you all the things God has done for me. He chose the place I was born and the family I was born into. He gave me intellectual and emotional and physical gifts that have carried me far in life. I was able to learn in good schools with teachers who cared deeply for me. I was able to grow up in relative safety and comfort. I had parents who loved me and instilled strong values in me. I have two brothers who are among my closest friends. Throughout my life, I’ve benefited from educational and professional opportunities. God brought a godly woman into my life who is my best friend. I have four children that I am embarrassingly proud of and love with all my heart. All of these are amazing blessings that come from the hands of God.

At the same time, I’ve seen my fair share of tragedy and hardship as well. Growing up wasn’t easy. My family faced financial hardships at times. My parents lost their business in the 1980’s and we almost ended up homeless as a result. I can remember days when all we had in our refrigerator was one cup of yogurt and there were five us to feed. I’ve had to overcome addictions in my life to alcohol and pornography. These behaviors cost me friendships and I grieve them to this day. My wife and I lost our first child as a result of major birth defects. Caleb would be 23 years old today. I suffered a professional failure in Wisconsin that almost put me out of ministry altogether. It also brought me face to face with the end of my faith. I’ve seen life-threatening poverty among those I love in developing countries around the world. I’ve tasted fear and anxiety and allowed my insecurities to cripple me at times. But through it all, there was one constant...God. He was always present and faithful to make Himself known to me as I remained committed to come before Him with my needs each and every day.

Perhaps that’s why these words from today ring so true for me...

“For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” (Psalm 30:5)

“You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever!” (Psalm 30:11-12)

When we choose to focus on all the good things God has done, our hearts are filled with gratitude. An infectious joy fills our lives. A peace that passes all understanding descends upon us. Our mourning turns to dancing. Our weeping tarries only for a night, giving way to joy in the morning. Yes, we will suffer in this “strange, mad, painful place.” Yes, life will be “disappointing and unpleasant” at times. Yes, there will be moments when you will feel like you are “stumbling and blundering through life blindfolded, as it were , with no sense of direction, and no understanding of what surrounds you.” Things may get so bad you may feel like you are “wasting your life and losing your soul.” But even there God is with you. God is waiting for you. God is near you. God will make Himself known to you. Simply keep walking through the open door into His presence. Keep approaching His throne of grace with confidence. Keep trusting God is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 31-33, Acts 21:17-36

July 24, 2021
People of the Truth

Readings for today: [Psalms 31-33, Acts 21:17-36](#)

“For God’s Word is solid to the core; everything he makes is sound inside and out. He loves it when everything fits, when his world is in plumb-line true. Earth is drenched in God’s affectionate satisfaction.” (Psalm 33:4-5)

“Because the LORD’s word is right, his every act is done in good faith. He loves righteousness and justice; the LORD’s faithful love fills the whole earth.” (Psalms 33:4-5)

“For the word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.” (Psalm 33:4-5)

One of the things I love doing is reading the same verses in different versions. It helps me grasp the depth and breadth of what God is trying to reveal to me. In today’s reading, we ran across these words speaking to the sufficiency of God’s Word. They highlight the truth of God’s Word. The trustworthiness of God’s Word. And what happens when human beings commit to following God’s Word. If we truly aligned our will with God’s will, the earth would be filled with righteousness and justice or as Eugene Peterson translated it, “Earth is drenched in God’s affectionate satisfaction.” I don’t know about you but I would love to live in such a world! I would love to live in a place flooded with God’s steadfast love and faithfulness. I would love to live a culture that reflects biblical values and the heart of the gospel. I would love to see all injustice end and all evil stopped and all sin cease. I would love to see everything “fit” according to God’s perfect plan.

Sadly, we don’t live in such a world. Even more tragically, we don’t live in such a church. The church is supposed to be the one place where God’s Word reigns supreme. It is the one community where God’s Word should hold ultimate authority. After all, we spend hours preaching God’s Word and teaching God’s Word and challenging people to follow God’s Word. But the influence of the world is powerful. Almost too hard to resist. Social media. Cable news. Talk radio. There is a cacophony of voices clamoring for our attention on a daily basis. It is chaotic. Noisy. Confusing. It’s easy to be drawn this way and that or tossed about like a ship on the waves of the sea. Across the country, churches are being torn apart by political divisions, ethnic divisions, social divisions, cultural divisions, and so much more. Add a dangerous pandemic to that mix and you have an incredibly toxic brew.

That’s why it’s so important to stay grounded in God’s Word. God’s people must remain tethered to God’s Truth. His Word is our lifeline in a world rapidly spinning out of control. His Word is our life-saver in a sea of chaos. His Word is the bedrock which keeps us stable in the midst of all the storms.

Bonus: If you want a great example of what I’m talking about, check out these two sermons by Dr. Tony Evans. He is addressing the issue of Critical Race Theory (CRT) from a biblical perspective or what he calls Kingdom Race Theology (KRT). It’s a great illustration on how to bring biblical truth to bear on one of the most pressing cultural issues of our day.

[Sermon #1](#)

[Sermon #2](#)

Readings for tomorrow: [Psalms 34-38, Acts 21:37-23:11](#)

July 26, 2021
Fixing our Eyes on Jesus

Readings for today: [Psalms 34-38, Acts 21:37-23:11](#)

One of my favorite verses is Hebrews 12:2 - “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” I believe it is the key to the Christian life. It is the pathway to all of God’s promises. Imagine a life filled with unspeakable joy, peace that passes all understanding, amazing grace, and unconditional love. All of that is accessed in Christ and through Christ. It is the glorious inheritance of the people of God. These are the riches God pours out on those who place their trust in His Beloved Son.

So why do so many Christians struggle? Why do so many Christians live with anxiety, doubt, suffering, pain, heartache, disappointment, discouragement, and fear? My experience as a pastor tells me that - at least in part - it’s because we take our eyes off of Jesus or we don’t know how to fix our eyes on Him in the first place. Too many of us want it both ways. We want to love the things of this world and love Jesus. We want to secure both an earthly and eternal inheritance. We want to be great in the eyes of our peers and in the eyes of God. We want to make a name for ourselves and a name for God. We want the position or platform and the power that comes with it without suffering the passion of Jesus. The Bible calls this double-mindedness. We’re trying to live in two worlds. Our loyalties are divided between two radically different kingdoms. Our allegiances are split. Our minds and hearts confused. Our thinking warped. And it’s why so many of us live “lives of quiet desperation” or we are full of “sound and fury signifying nothing.”

So what does it mean to fix our eyes on Jesus? What does that actually look like in practice? Think of Peter walking on water. He took steps of faith outside of the boat. Outside his comfort zone. Outside his normative experience. Peter was a fisherman. He knew boats inside and out. He knew the Sea of Galilee inside and out. He knew the laws of physics. He knew people didn’t walk on water. But when he fixed his eyes on Jesus, something that was impossible became possible. Something he would never have imagined suddenly became reality. He actually stepped out on the waves and only began to sink when he started to look around and allowed doubt to creep in. Think of Paul. Paul was the Jew of Jews. He was born into the tribe of Benjamin. Circumcised according to the Law on the eighth day. Studied under one of the greatest rabbi’s of his day. Advanced beyond his age and his peers. He was a brilliant Pharisee. According to the Law of God, he was blameless. His devotion to the Law of God made him the greatest heresy hunter of his time. But when he fixed his eyes on Jesus outside the city of Damascus, everything changed. All the accomplishments of his former life turned to dust. He counted everything now as loss for the sake of knowing Christ.

I thought about these two men when I read through the Psalms assigned for today. The language is poetic. The images are striking. The words make our hearts sing when we read them. I believe that’s because they are conveying the same deep truth that the author of the Book of Hebrews is pointing us to. Simply put, the Psalmist wants us to see Jesus. Wants us to fix our eyes on Him. Wants the treasures of this earth to grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace. Listen again. Take your time. Slow down. Savor each verse and the promise it contains. Let the Spirit stir your heart use these words to change your life...

“My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad.” (Psalm 34:2)

“I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.” (Psalm 34:4)

“Those who look to the Lord are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed.” (Psalm 34:5)

“Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!” (Psalm 34:8)

“The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry. The face of the Lord is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth. When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all.” (Psalm 34:15-19)

“Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” (Psalm 37:4)

“Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday.” (Psalm 37:5-6)

“Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!” (Psalm 37:7)

“The Lord knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will remain forever...”(Psalm 37:18)

“Wait for the Lord and keep his way, and he will exalt you to inherit the land; you will look on when the wicked are cut off.” (Psalm 37:34)

“The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; he is their stronghold in the time of trouble. The Lord helps them and delivers them; he delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in him.” (Psalm 37:39-40)

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 39-41, Acts 23:12-35

July 27, 2021
Life is Fleeting

Readings for today: [Psalms 39-41, Acts 23:12-35](#)

Life is fleeting. It comes and goes. It is here today and gone tomorrow. It's full of ups and downs. We have moments when we feel like we are on top of the world. We have moments when we feel we are living in the depths of despair. Circumstances conspire to steal our joy. Situations are thrust upon us over which we have no control. Sacred moments rush in filling our souls with peace. We experience special moments of feeling deeply loved and accepted. But it's messy. It's a jumble. Life is not always up and to the right.

The Bible acknowledges all these things, of course. One of the things I love most about God's Word is that it never shies away from real life. It embraces all that is good and bad and ugly about our experience in this world. It reminds us never to place our trust or hope in the things of this world. Instead, the Bible encourages us to store up our treasures in heaven. To look beyond the horizons of this earth to the world to come. The reality is we are eternal creatures. We are creatures made to live forever. Death is not the end for us but merely a doorway to another dimension of life. That dimension could be heaven. That dimension could be hell. Either way, we will find ourselves still very much alive. Conscious. Aware. And that should create a sense of perspective for us. It should right-size our expectations of life in this world.

I love how the Psalmist puts it in today's reading...“O Lord, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am! Behold, you have made my days a few hand-breadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! Surely a man goes about as a shadow! Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!” (Psalm 39:4-6) It's also good to read in the Message version...“Tell me, what's going on, God? How long do I have to live? Give me the bad news! You've kept me on pretty short rations; my life is a string too short to be saved. Oh! we're all puffs of air. Oh! we're all shadows in a campfire. Oh! we're just spit in the wind. We make our pile, and then we leave it.”(Psalm 39:4-6)

It sounds pretty hopeless, doesn't it? Sounds like the Psalmist is struggling to come to grips with meaning and purpose in the face of death. As he feels his own life potentially ebbing away, he wonders what the point of it all might be? Our days are indeed few. We spend quite a few of them in turmoil. Our lives are strings too short to be saved. We are but puffs of air on the wind. We are shadows in a campfire. Naked we came from the womb and naked we shall return to the dust. We can take nothing with us. All this is true and still the Psalmist declares, “My hope is in You.” (Psalms 39:7) Despite how he's feeling. Despite what his lived experience is teaching him. Against all natural human instinct, he clings to hope as he clings to God. It's a powerful testimony and one we all need to hear especially in this cultural moment.

There is so much about life right now that causes us to despair. People we love are getting sick or suffering or even dying. Friendships we once enjoyed are fracturing. Whatever work/life balance we had before the pandemic has been completely upended. Routines have been scrapped. Rhythms disrupted. Schedules shot. Layer onto that the increasing polarization of our country, our workplaces, our neighborhoods, our schools, our churches, even our families, and it probably feels like nowhere is truly safe. The Psalmist knows how we feel. “I was mute and silent; I held my peace to no avail, and my distress grew worse. My heart became hot within me. As I mused, the fire burned...” (Psalm 39:2-3) So what did he do? Did he lash out? Did he burn everything to the ground? Did he let his despair get the best of

him? No. He turned to the Lord. He cried out to God. He took a step back and tried to see things from God's perspective. This is what gave him hope. Not that everything would turn out okay in the end or that he would live happily ever after but that God would hear his prayer. God would see his tears. God would meet him in his sojourning and cause him to smile again.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 42-43, Acts 24

July 28, 2021
Mental Health

Readings for today: Psalms 42-43, Acts 24

Recently, our awareness of the importance of mental health has been elevated by some of the top athletes in the world. It began with Naomi Osaka, the number one female tennis player in the world, skipping the French Open press conferences to take care of herself. It was highlighted again during the Olympics by arguably the greatest gymnast of all time, Simone Biles, withdrawing from both team and individual competitions. It reminded us of Michael Phelps and his struggles once he left the Olympic stage. This has sparked a conversation that is spreading rapidly as more and more athletes open up about their personal struggles to deal with the pressure that comes with competing at an elite level. This is not new, of course, but the openness to actually talking about it is new. The vulnerability displayed by these athletes is both courageous and inspiring and hopefully will lead to some necessary changes moving forward. Elite athletes are human beings just like all of us. They are subject to the same fears and anxieties that we all suffer from. Rather than dismiss their concerns or critique their decisions, we should thank them for casting a spotlight on what is rapidly - according to mental health professionals across the country - another, albeit more hidden, pandemic. Depression rates have tripled over the last year. Substance abuse rates have skyrocketed. More and more adults are reporting struggles with anxiety disorders. And we have yet to see the crest of the tide. Many of us are just beginning to come to grips with the losses we've suffered over the past year. Many of us are in the early stages of grief and are trying to find ways to cope even as coronavirus cases begin to rise and the specter of re-instated mandates loom. Many of us are teetering on the edge of burnout and feel like we cannot open up to those around us. As the tidal wave builds, I expect it to cost people jobs, churches, friendships, marriages, and families. In short, all we hold dear. So where do go for help?

As always, we turn to the Lord. I love how the Psalmist describes his own struggle with anxiety and fear in today's reading...

"As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." We are living through a spiritual drought of historic proportions. We continue to turn to cracked cisterns of our own making rather than to the well of Living Water. The thirst we are feeling arises from the very depths of our being and can only be quenched by God Himself.

"When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, "Where is your God?" How many of us are tossing and turning at night? How many of us are struggling to sleep? Struggling to rest? Struggling to find peace? How many of us are wrestling with demons that threaten to overwhelm? How many of us are turning to alcohol or opioids or marijuana to calm our fears?

"These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival." Perhaps we can all look back and remember a more joyful time? A time when we seemed happy? Things seemed good? Maybe life was going great pre-pandemic and COVID has utterly wrecked whatever dreams you may have had? Maybe it's been a long time since you felt safe and secure and like you could come into the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise?

The Psalmist gives us a prescription for our pain. Medicine for our mental health. Listen closely to what he says...

“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me. By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. I say to God, my rock: “Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?” As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?” Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.”

The Psalmist teaches us to do three things when we feel anxious and afraid. First, we remember. We remember the good things God has done. We remember what God has done for His people throughout history. How God met them in places like Jordan and Hermon. Second, we remember God’s character. He is a God of steadfast love and faithfulness. He walks beside us by day. He stands guard over us by night. He will never leave us nor forsake us. Third and finally, we engage in the act of praise. We praise God in both good times and bad. We praise God when the skies are clear or in the midst of the storm. We praise God when we feel great and we praise God when we feel weak. We praise God when we feel deeply connected to Him and we praise God when we feel like He’s distant or has forgotten us. The act of praise literally lifts our hearts. The act of praise re-orientates our thoughts. The act of praise releases dopamine in the brain which provides a strong antidote to the anxiety we may be feeling.

Friends, it’s okay to not be okay. It’s okay to feel weak, fragile, and vulnerable. It’s okay to not have it altogether. It’s okay to admit you need help. God is with you. He will never leave you. He will never forsake you. He loves you with an everlasting love. And He has surrounded you with people and resources for help when you find yourself in need. Come to the well of Living Water and let Christ quench your thirsty soul.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 44-46, Acts 25

July 30, 2021
God's Politics

Readings for today: [Psalms 47-49, Acts 26](#)

We live in deeply divided political times. Not only here in America but around the world. The tribal impulse lying deep in the heart of every person is breaking out in violence across the globe. Democrats vs. Republicans. Progressives vs. conservatives. Left wing extremism vs. right-wing extremism. Fascism vs. communism. Authoritarian regimes vs. populist uprisings. The conflicts are often ethnic, religious, and socio-economic. Each class vying for power. Each tribe jockeying for control. Each party seeking to dominate the other. The rhetoric is heated and often hateful. Political opponents are often cast as traitors and enemies of the state. Violence is subtly or not so subtly encouraged. Fear has been weaponized. Anxiety has been conscripted. Shame has been employed to devastating effect in the cause of ideological purity.

What's a Christian to do? How should a Christ-follower respond? Well, I love how the Apostle Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." What is Paul talking about here? He's talking about using a gentle answer to turn away wrath. He's talking about confronting violence by turning the other cheek. He's talking about addressing hatred with love. He's talking about overcoming hurt and pain with forgiveness and grace. Now some might call Paul naive. Some might consider him a Pollyanna. Some might argue you have to fight fire with fire lest you be consumed. But Paul's no stranger to abuse. Paul's no stranger to injustice. Paul's no stranger to pain and suffering. Furthermore, even a cursory reading of the Book of Acts shows how politically savvy Paul could be whether it was arguing in front of the Sanhedrin or before the Areopagus in Athens or attempting to convince King Agrippa to place his faith in Christ or ultimately in his appeal to Rome. Paul used each and every trial to proclaim Jesus and he never resorted to underhanded or manipulative tactics to achieve his goals.

What shaped Paul's approach? What gave him the confidence to stand fast when the temptation would be to use whatever means necessary to preserve his own life or the lives of those he loved? It was his confidence in God. Paul was a Pharisee. He had the Old Testament memorized. From birth, he had been raised to believe and to trust in the sovereignty of God. I imagine when Paul found himself on trial before political or religious authorities, he may have even recited the words from Psalm 47 to himself...

"Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy! For the Lord, the Most High, is to be feared, a great king over all the earth. He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet. He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves. God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet. Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King, sing praises! For God is the King of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm! God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne. The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God; he is highly exalted!"

What would happen if we truly believed God ruled the nations of the earth? What would happen if we truly lived as if God were seated on His throne? How would it change the way we live, the way we interact, the way we engage politically if we had complete and utter confidence that though earthly kingdoms rise and fall, the Kingdom of God endures forever? Friends, love of country is a good thing, it

simply cannot become an ultimate thing. Political engagement is a good thing, it simply cannot become cage match to the death. Standing up for what you believe is a good thing but not if you are standing on the backs of those who may disagree with you. Ideological purity leads idolatry when we forget that it is God who sits on the throne of the universe.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 50-52, Acts 27:1-26

July 31, 2021
Preparing for Worship

Readings for today: [Psalms 50-52, Acts 27:1-26](#)

It's important to prepare our hearts for worship. It's important to understand the magnitude of the act we participate in on a Saturday evening or Sunday morning. Worship is not entertainment. Worship is not an experience. Worship is an encounter. An encounter with the Living God. In worship we enter into His Presence. We come into His house. His throne room. We find ourselves in His space which is governed by His terms. His will. His ways. As such, our will no longer matters. Our desires no longer reign. Our thoughts and attitudes no longer hold any importance. God is God and we are not. If we are not overwhelmingly confronted with that thought when we worship then we must question whether we have truly worshipped at all.

God doesn't need us, friends. He doesn't need our worship. He doesn't need our gifts. He doesn't need our attention. He is fully complete and whole in Himself. He is fully satisfied in Himself. He is fully sufficient in Himself. Listen to how the Psalmist puts it... "Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me. I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds. For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?" (Psalm 50:8-13) God is not like us. He is wholly other. He exists outside time and space. He has no need of anything we might bring. And yet, He extends His hand to us. He invites us to be in relationship with Him. Out of the overflow of the love that exists between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are invited to participate in the life of God in worship. It is the greatest privilege of our lives. The greatest honor we could ever receive. This is why we "offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform our vows to the Most High, and call upon Him in the day of trouble..." (Psalm 50:14-15) trusting Him to deliver us.

Such a monumental event requires intentional preparation. We would never attend a function at the White House without first thinking through what we will wear, what we will say, or what we might do. We would never attend a special event held in someone's honor without preparing a gift. So how does one prepare oneself for worship? We pray the prayer King David prayed in Psalm 51. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit." (Psalm 51:10-12) We ask God to do what we cannot. We cannot wash ourselves clean. We cannot remove the stain of sin. We cannot maintain a righteous spirit. These are things God must do for us and the great news of the gospel is He already has! Out of the deepest gratitude for all God has done in Christ, we bring the only sacrifice that is acceptable. The only sacrifice God values. The only sacrifice we can possibly offer which is "a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, God will not despise." (Psalm 51:17)

When we humble ourselves before God in worship. Offering Him the broken pieces of our lives. Asking Him to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. God responds. God answers our prayers. God hears our cries. And He goes to work. We become like a green olive tree in His house. His steadfast love and faithfulness sustain us for all of life and all eternity. Our hearts overflow with gratitude and thanksgiving for all He has done. And we find ourselves longing more and more to join God's people in worship around His throne.

Readings for tomorrow: None