

December 2021

December 1, 2021 Can Dry Bones Live?

Readings for today: Ezekiel 37-38, 1 Peter 4

December 2, 2021

Readings for today: Ezekiel 39-40, 1 Peter 5

December 3, 2021 The Lord's Return

Readings for today: Ezekiel 41-42, 2 Peter 1

December 4, 2021 Living the Christian Life

Readings for today: Ezekiel 43-44, 2 Peter 2

December 6, 2021 Living Water

Readings for today: Ezekiel 45-48, 2 Peter 3, 1 John 1

December 7, 2021 Faithful

Readings for today: Daniel 1-2, 1 John 2

December 8, 2021 Another in the Fire

Readings for today: Daniel 3-4, 1 John 3

December 9, 2021

Readings for today: Daniel 5-6, 1 John 4

December 10, 2021 Strange Visions

Readings for today: Daniel 7-8, 1 John 5

December 11, 2021 Systemic Sin

Readings for today: Daniel 9-10, 2 John 1

December 13, 2021 Spiritual Adultery

Readings for today: Daniel 11-12, Hosea 1-4, 3 John 1, Jude

December 14, 2021

Readings for today: Hosea 5-6, Revelation 1

December 15, 2021 2nd Advent

Readings for today: Hosea 7-10, Revelation 2

December 16, 2021 Radical Love of God

Readings for today: Hosea 11-14, Revelation 3

December 17, 2021 Revival

Readings for today: Joel 1-3, Revelation 4

December 18, 2021 God's Justice

Readings for today: Amos 1-3, Revelation 5

December 20, 2021 Let Justice Roll Down

Readings for today: Amos 4-9, Revelation 6-7

December 21, 2021

Readings for today: Obadiah, Jonah 1-3, Revelation 8

December 22, 2021 Dying to Self

Readings for today: Jonah 4, Micah 1-2, Revelation 9

December 23, 2021 The Mystery of God

Readings for today: Micah 3, Revelation 10

December 24, 2021 Our Heavenly Father

Readings for today: Micah 4-5, Revelation 11

December 25, 2021 Biblical Justice

Readings for today: Micah 6-7, Revelation 12

December 27, 2021 666

Readings for today: Nahum 1-3, Habakkuk 1-2, Revelation 13-14

December 28, 2021 The Call to Humility

Readings for today: Habakkuk 3, Zephaniah 1-3, Haggai 1-2, Revelation 15-16

December 29, 2021 Yahweh Remembers

Readings for today: Zechariah 1-6, Revelation 17-18

December 30, 2021 New Year's Resolutions

Readings for today: Zechariah 7-9, Revelation 19

December 31, 2021 Come, Lord Jesus!

Readings for today: Zechariah 10-14, Malachi 1-4, Revelation 20-22

December 1, 2021
Can Dry Bones Live?

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 37-38, 1 Peter 4](#)

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

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

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

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

life in these valleys just as surely as He did the people of Israel! With God, hope is never completely lost!

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

[Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 39-40, 1 Peter 5](#)

December 3, 2021
The Lord's Return

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 41-42, 2 Peter 1](#)

I know it may feel like a slog to read through passages like the ones we're in right now in Ezekiel. Basically, we're getting an overview of the blueprints of the new Temple. It's all measurements and dimensions and cubits. It can be hard to understand much less picture in your mind's eye. Why should we care? Well, take a step back. Ezekiel has received a vision of the Lord's return! All this work from the initial vision in chapter forty to the coming of the Lord in chapter forty-three is about the restoration of God's people! It's a glorious promise and it must have filled Ezekiel's heart with hope.

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

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

“Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east. And the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory. And the vision I saw was just like the vision that I had seen when he came to destroy the city, and just like the vision that I had seen by the Chebar canal. And I fell on my face. As the glory of the Lord entered the temple by the gate facing east, the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the Lord filled the temple.” (Ezekiel 43:1-5) It is

impossible to overstate the joy Ezekiel must have felt as he sees this vision the of the Lord's return. As painful as it was for him to see the Lord leaving the Temple in his earlier visions, it is now equally exciting to witness the Lord's return. God had not forgotten His people! God had not abandoned His promises! God would prove faithful! No wonder he fell on his face!

Life is often hard. There are moments, even seasons, where we feel like everything has come crashing down around us. COVID kills millions. Governments lock down to protect their people. Economies crash. Jobs are lost. Homes go into foreclosure. Relationships break down in divorce. Opioid abuse skyrockets. Someone we love dies. There is so much in this world that brings us pain and heartbreak. It can even feel at times like the Lord has abandoned us. Ridden off on his chariot somewhere far away, never to return. Don't believe the lie! God is faithful! He is true! He is steadfast in His love! He will never forsake or abandon you! He is with you! His glory is your sanctuary and your rearguard! If you walk by faith. If you trust in Him. If you surrender to His will and His ways. He will provide for you. He will restore the years the locusts have eaten. He will rebuild the ruins of your life. He will bring forth new growth and new life from the barren ground. This is His promise and He will never fail!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 43-44, 2 Peter 2

December 4, 2021
Living the Christian Life

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 43-44, 2 Peter 2](#)

I am often asked what it means to be a Christian. Is it raising a hand and praying a prayer? Is it participating in confirmation as a young person? Does it have to do with church attendance? Is it an intellectual assent to an idea? Living a particularly moral life? What does it mean to actually be a Christian? I think Peter's words from yesterday sum it up quite well...

"His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ..." (2 Peter 1:3-8)

First and foremost, being a Christian involves faith. Faith is having complete confidence that God is able to deliver on His promises. And God has promised that every Christian will be filled with His divine power, be a partaker of His divine nature, and given everything that pertains to life and godliness. In short, we will lack nothing when it comes to living for God. Our hearts will burn with a desire to know Him more. We will love being in worship. Love spending time in prayer. Love studying God's Word. We will love serving those whom God loves. The least and the lost in our world.

Second, being a Christian means actively seeking to align your life with Christ. Submit all you say and do to His Lordship. It means walking in faithful obedience to His Law not because you have to but because you long to. Once we've been saved by grace, we walk in grace. Peter says it clearly. The true Christian will seek to supplement their saving faith with virtue and knowledge and self-control and steadfastness and godliness and brotherly affection. As these things increase in your life, you will bear much fruit for the Kingdom. This requires a diligence and intentionality that often escapes us. The temptations of this world are strong and distract us. We find our hearts pulled in a lot of different directions and too many of us settle for the lowest bar rather than push ourselves to greater heights for the glory of Christ.

Third, Peter offers a sober warning as well. Refusing to follow Christ is serious business. "For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell...if God did not spare the ancient world...when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; if God by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes condemned them to extinction...then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment..." Therefore, we need to take heed lest we, in our pride and arrogance and willful ignorance, refuse to tremble before the glorious ones. We do not want to be counted as "irrational animals", "unsteady souls", "accursed children", "waterless springs", or "mists driven by the storm." (Assorted verses from 2 Peter 2)

Friends, as we draw near to Christmas, we are reminded of the significance of our celebration. Nothing less than salvation is at stake in what God has done in Jesus Christ. Devoting our lives to Him is essential if we are to escape the righteous wrath and judgment of God and gain entrance into God's

Kingdom. As we journey through this season of Advent, I encourage you to take Peter's words to heart, "Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 1:10-11)

Readings for tomorrow: None

December 6, 2021
Living Water

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 45-48, 2 Peter 3, 1 John 1](#)

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 1-2, 1 John 2

December 7, 2021

Faithful

Readings for today: [Daniel 1-2, 1 John 2](#)

Daniel is one of my favorites. He is a man sold out to God. No matter what life throws at him, he always remains faithful. As a teenager, he was carted off into exile in Babylon. A traumatic, painful experience. Once he arrived in Babylon, he was identified as a young man of promise and removed from his family. Sequestered in the king's household, he began training as a "wise man." Someone who would counsel the king on the most important matters. Someone who would serve the empire and seek to expand its influence and power. One can easily imagine the internal struggle Daniel must have felt. How does he serve God faithfully while counseling some of the great tyrants in history? How does he speak God's truth to a pagan power? How does he maintain his integrity even as he offers wisdom to kings whose egos are often out of control?

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

Fast forward a few years. Daniel has taken his place among the wise men of Babylon. A decree goes out that all of them are to be killed because no one can interpret the king's dream. "Because of this the king was angry and very furious, and commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed. So the decree went out, and the wise men were about to be killed; and they sought Daniel and his companions, to kill them. Then Daniel replied with prudence and discretion to Arioch, the captain of the king's guard, who had gone out to kill the wise men of Babylon." (Daniel 2:12-14) Once again, Daniel demonstrates humility and respect. He asks for an audience with the king. He trusts God to reveal the mystery in prayer. And when given his audience, he testifies to the greatness and power of God and the king humbles himself before him.

A few more years pass. The king grows so insecure he decides to build a monument to himself and demand everyone fall down in worship before it. It's the height of arrogance. Daniel doesn't appear in this story but his colleagues do. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego follow his example. Confronted

with a situation which would force them to break the second commandment, they refuse to bow down in worship and instead remain faithful. The king is furious but the men answer him with grace and truth. "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." (Daniel 3:16-18) They are thrown into a furnace of fire. The king and his courtiers watch, waiting for them to be consumed. An incredible miracle happens as God Himself appears and delivers them from death. The result is again the humbling of the king. "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God." (Daniel 3:28)

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 3-4, 1 John 3

December 8, 2021
Another in the Fire

Readings for today: [Daniel 3-4, 1 John 3](#)

As I said yesterday, I love the book of Daniel. I think it's an important book for us to read in this particular cultural moment here in America. Our culture is rapidly cutting ties with its Judeo-Christian heritage. This has created a moral vacuum that all kinds of secular, humanist theories have rushed in to fill. Formerly shared understandings about gender, sexuality, marriage, and family are all being upended or cast aside. Even professions like medicine, law, accounting, and science are now viewed as fluid and mutable for lack of a common moral framework. And while some important good has emerged like a deeper awareness of systemic injustice especially as it relates to economics and ethnicity, we no longer seem to have the moral resources to find a solution. Every proposal is viewed with deep suspicion because it comes embedded within power structures that are by definition corrupt. The result is chaos. Riots. Violent protests. Anarchy. So what's a Christian to do? How should a Christian respond? What does it look like to live in a thoroughly pagan world where "might makes right" and those in power will go to any lengths to stay in power?

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced similar challenges. They served at the whim of a megalomaniacal emperor who demanded the worship of his people. Nebuchadnezzar is one of history's greatest tyrants. He was initially pagan to the core. Believed himself to be a god. He had a statue of himself built of gold that was 90 feet high. He set it up in a broad plain where everyone could see it. He had scores of musicians ready to call people to worship. At the sound of their instruments, everyone was instructed to fall on their faces before the idol. Those who refused would be burned alive. So how did the three men respond?

First and foremost, they kept faith. They refused to break the First and Second Commandments. They refused to offer any god but Yahweh their devotion and worship. They would not bow down to any graven image or idol. Second, they humbly accepted the consequences of their choices. When Nebuchadnezzar confronts them and threatens them with death, their response is telling... "If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." (Daniel 3:17-18) They feel no need to fight back. No need to resist. No need to even object. They fully trust God. They place their lives in His hands. Third, they apparently take no credit for the miracle that takes place. When Nebuchadnezzar sees the fourth figure in the furnace and observes that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are not harmed by the flames, he asks them to come out of the furnace. We don't know what they actually said to Nebuchadnezzar but the king's own words surely communicate what he must have heard, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way." Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon." (Daniel 3:28-30)

What a courageous example for us to follow! When faced with the challenges of our current cultural moment, we must resist the temptation to break faith. We too must stand strong in the Lord, trusting Him with our lives. We must accept that keeping faith will result in very real consequences. We may lose jobs or livelihoods. We may lose opportunities or be unjustly treated. We may be personally

attacked or denied certain rights. Who knows? Maybe we'll even eventually face prison for the crime of belief as many of our brothers and sisters do around the world. Rather than compromise or run or even resist, we must embrace the cost of discipleship. We must place our lives in God's hands and trust Him for provision and protection, whether in this life or the next.

A few years back, a great worship tune came out called, "Another in the Fire." I encourage you to give it a listen as you prayerfully reflect on today's reading.

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=zmNc0L7Ac5c>

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 5-6, 1 John 4

December 10, 2021
Strange Visions

Readings for today: [Daniel 7-8, 1 John 5](#)

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

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

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

"As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened...I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." (Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14) Forget the four great beasts. Forget the visions of lions and eagles and bears. Rams and goats thundering towards one another across the earth. Forget the terrifying beast with ten horns or the little horn with the big mouth. The focus of Daniel's vision is on the One called the Ancient of Days. The One who reigns and rules over it all. Pure as driven snow. Engulfed in holy fire. Tens of thousands at his beck and call. He judges the earth. He judges kings and rulers. He holds all dominion and power in His hand. And He calls to the Son of Man. Out of the clouds of heaven comes

the Christ and He is given all authority on heaven and on earth. All peoples and nations and tribes and tongues shall serve him. His kingdom shall never end. This is the main point of the vision Daniel receives. God letting his beloved prophet know He is not done. There is still hope. There will come a day when Christ shall come and all things shall be set right and made new.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 9-10, 2 John 1

December 11, 2021
Systemic Sin

Readings for today: [Daniel 9-10, 2 John 1](#)

The 16th century poet and priest, John Donne, once wrote these famous words...

No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never sent to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

It's a powerful reminder that we are intricately connected. We are part of a larger whole. What I do or do not do impacts those around me. I create ripple effects that I am largely oblivious to but are nonetheless very real. Daniel understood this, of course. And his prayer in chapter nine of our reading today reflects the Biblical truth that we are both individually as well as corporately responsible for sin. He uses the first person plural pronoun throughout. He says things like, "We have sinned and done wrong", "We have not listened to your servants", "All Israel has transgressed your law", and "We have not obeyed your voice." Daniel clearly understands he is part of a larger whole. Part of a larger community of people who are being held accountable for generational sin. He is being punished for things his forefathers did and it is righteous. It is just. It is good. He also doesn't pretend like he's perfect or somehow any different than those who came before him. He confesses his own sin and the ways he has contributed to their current predicament. He is as much to blame as any and acknowledges his own need for God's grace and mercy even as he prays for his people.

This is a hard truth for us to grasp. Especially if one lives in America. We have been raised on the myth that every man or woman is indeed an island. That one's success or failure in life is directly tied to the amount of effort one puts in. And while individual effort is absolutely essential for success, it is not the only factor in play. In fact, it may not even be the biggest factor! Certainly the start one gets in life makes a difference. One's physical and mental health. The stability of one's family of origin. Educational opportunities. Access to resources, especially financial resources, is key. Opportunities to advance in one's career. The elimination of any barriers that might otherwise impede upward mobility. The list goes on and on. Layer in the impact of local, state, and federal laws, social policy, community resources, etc. and I think you get the point. None of us is an island. None of us finds success purely on our own. All of us are part of something larger than ourselves that directly contributes or inhibits our ability to succeed.

Now there are some on the progressive left who want to eliminate personal responsibility altogether. They argue we are NOT responsible for own actions but are simply products of the environment that produces us. So we should not be held accountable. If we are unable to succeed in life, it's because the system is stacked against us. Expectations are thereby lowered. Equity of outcomes must be mandated and enforced. Standards must be eliminated because they are products of oppression. On the flip side, there are some on the conservative right who want to pretend like systemic oppression doesn't exist. They argue everyone is solely responsible for their own actions and all environmental challenges are essentially the same. They resist any attempt at reform. They refuse to acknowledge the structure barriers that do exist. They close their eyes to the many ways standards, outcomes, and standards are culturally bound and influenced. Christians must reject these false binaries. We must embrace the truth of Scripture that we are both personally and corporately responsible for our sin. Like Daniel, we must confess our personal and corporate guilt and ask for God's forgiveness. Furthermore, we must hold

both people and systems accountable. We must work for personal transformation and corporate reformation. We must work for personal holiness and communal/social justice. We must ask the Holy Spirit to help us see the ripples we create with the lives that we lead and do all we can to make sure we are spreading ripples of righteousness and peace.

Ultimately, this goes back to the most ancient of questions...“Am I my brother’s keeper?” Am I responsible for my brother or sister and their well-being? Do I have a share in the lives of those around me? Am I aware of the impact I make with the words I say or do not say? The things I do or not do? Have I grasped the full effect of every dollar I spend? Every minute I waste? Every breath I take? The Lord’s answer is clear. You are your brother’s keeper. You are responsible for your sister. You are part of a larger whole. You are part of His family. You are part of His Body. You are a royal priesthood. A holy nation. A people for God’s own possession. And the great news of the gospel is that just as sin and death and guilt and shame entered the world through one man, so did righteousness and grace and peace through the one man, Jesus Christ! He died for all sin. Personal and corporate. Individual and communal. He is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the entire world! Thanks be to God!

Readings for tomorrow: None

December 13, 2021
Spiritual Adultery

Readings for today: [Daniel 11-12](#), [Hosea 1-4](#), [3 John 1](#), [Jude](#)

As a pastor, I have spent countless hours counseling married couples. More often than not, they are in my office because one or both have been unfaithful. They have stepped out on their spouse with porn or with an old flame, a co-worker, perhaps even a prostitute. The pain is unspeakable. The betrayal beyond words. It is almost impossible to recover. Why? Because even in our sex-saturated culture there is a sense that sexual intimacy is the greatest gift one can give to another person. It is the gift of oneself. The gift of the deepest, most profound parts of oneself. It is an act that transcends simple physical pleasure, joining hearts and entangling souls in a deeply spiritual way. This is why God has always reserved it for the marriage covenant. Sex was something to be enjoyed within the bounds of an unconditional commitment to one other person for as long as you both shall live.

However, we have made a mockery of this gift. Our culture debases sexuality by promoting a hookup, swipe right culture. We called it sexual freedom and yet suffer from an epidemic of STD's, unplanned pregnancies, and sexual abuse. We thought it would lead to greater relational intimacy but the quality of our relationships continues to decline. Marriages fail as individuals pursue their own pleasure and fulfillment at the expense of the other. The sexual revolution continues to gain steam through social media, television, movies, etc. which are univocal in their declaration that we are at the mercy of our hormonal urges. Whatever feels good is right and true regardless of the collateral damage it leaves in our wake.

This is the central message of Hosea. God takes up the very real issue of adultery and employs it as a metaphor to describe the relationship between Himself and His people. He even calls His prophet Hosea to embody this relationship by marrying a prostitute. Hosea's pain is a reflection of God's pain. Hosea's heartbreak at Gomer's continual betrayals is a reflection of God's heartbreak over Israel's worship of the pagan gods. The names of Hosea's children reflect not only his suffering but the divine pathos of God Himself as He wrestles with the unconditional love He pledged to Israel. When Hosea purchases his bride back from the slave traders in Hosea 3, one is reminded of the incredible grace of God which relentlessly pursues us to the day we die.

It is abundantly clear, throughout the book of Hosea, that our only hope is the great faithfulness of God. The steadfast loyal love of God for His people. No matter what they may do or where they may go or how many times they play the "whore" and chase after other gods, Yahweh will not let go. He will redeem. He will save.

"Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. And in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Children of the living God." And the children of Judah and the children of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head. And they shall go up from the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel." (Hosea 1:10-11)

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. And in that day, declares the Lord, you will call me 'My Husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal.' For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more.

And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord.” (Hosea 2:14-18, 20)

“Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king, and they shall come in fear to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days.” (Hosea 3:5)

This is the heart of the gospel. No matter how bad things get. No matter how many times we sin and fall short of the glory of God. No matter how far we run into the far country and play the prodigal. God is faithful. God is loyal. Steadfast. True. He will never stop pursuing. Never stop watching. Never stop waiting for us to repent and return. There is nothing that can separate us from His love. Nothing that can snatch us out of His hand. Nothing that can break the eternal covenant He first made with us. This is good news! Even great news for those who love God and are called according to His purpose!

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 5-6, Revelation 1

December 15, 2021
2nd Advent

Readings for today: [Hosea 7-10, Revelation 2](#)

One of the things I love most about reading through the Bible in a Year is getting to December and starting the Book of Revelation. Reading about the 2nd Advent of Christ while we celebrate the 1st Advent seems very appropriate. Even as we celebrate the joy of Jesus' birth, we find our hearts naturally turning towards the Day when He will come again. The great Day of Judgment when the living and the dead are raised. On that Day, heaven and earth come together in consummate glory and the reign of God is established once and for all.

When will it happen? How will it happen? No one really knows and the Book of Revelation is notoriously difficult to decipher and understand. So here are some basic ground rules as you wade into the final book of the Bible. First, it is written by John while in prison on the island of Patmos. In order to get this letter out to the churches, John had to write it in code. The Roman authorities would have screened every piece of communication coming in and out of the prison so John had to be careful. Second, the writing is apocalyptic which is a very specific genre known to many in the ancient world. The fantastic images and visions are hallmarks of this type of literature. Third, the churches John is writing to are under persecution. They are facing the prospect of torture and death on a daily basis. This book is meant to encourage and equip them so they can endure the rough days ahead. Fourth, many different Christians approach this book from many different interpretive angles. There is no one way to read this book and we want to make sure to extend liberty and charity to one another as we go. Wherever you land on the "End Times" theological spectrum, what's most important is that we all agree Jesus will come again.

So let me begin this home stretch with one of my favorite verses... "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." (Revelation 1:8) God spoke the first Word in creation and God will have the last Word in consummation. He who began all things, will bring them to a close according to His will and good pleasure. God is. This is all we know. This is really all we can say. God stands outside the time and space continuum He created and will remain there looking in until He determines the time is right for His return. As John said in His Gospel, God revealed Himself to the world but the world did not recognize Him. He revealed Himself to His people, His family, and they rejected Him. When He comes again, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord. He will leave no doubt. "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen." (Revelation 1:7)

These are important words to reflect on as we begin as are the Spirit's warnings to the seven churches. They provide a good spiritual barometer to help us discern how ready we truly are for Christ's return. Have we abandoned our first love? Are we facing persecution for our faith? What idols do we cling to? What sexual immorality do we engage in? Do we tolerate sin? Are we ambivalent towards the gospel? Is our faith lukewarm at best?

These are important matters for prayer as we close out one year and head into another. What spiritual resolutions will you make in 2022 to grow your relationship with Christ and His church? What commitments will you take on as you seek to serve Christ and make His name known?

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 11-14, Revelation 3

December 16, 2021
Radical Love of God

Readings for today: [Hosea 11-14, Revelation 3](#)

In the midst of all the judgment in Hosea, hope springs eternal. God loves His people with an everlasting love. He cannot abandon them to their fate. He cannot relinquish them or give them up. He cannot walk out on them. His love is steadfast. True. Loyal. Even in the face of betrayal and adultery and sin. I love how Hosea 11 describes God's love...

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son...it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them.” (Hosea 11:1, 3-4) One thing we must always remember when reading the Scriptures is that God has revealed Himself to us as Father. Abba. Daddy. This description is a precious one every parent can understand. We teach our children to walk. We watch them take those first steps. We hold them in our arms. Comfort them when they fall. Bandage up their nicks and cuts and “owies.” We lead them throughout the course of their lives, always desiring what is good for them. We provide for them. Train them. Discipline them. Teach them. This is our calling as a parent and it is notable that God chooses this particular metaphor to describe His relationship with His people.

“How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. They shall go after the Lord; he will roar like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west; they shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria, and I will return them to their homes, declares the Lord.” (Hosea 11:8-11) How many of us as parents have watched our children go astray? Watch them wander off the path? Watch them choose self-destruction? How many times have I sat in my office across from parents trying to give them hope for their addicted son or estranged daughter? How many times have I prayed these very words myself over my own children? No matter what they do, I cannot give them up. I cannot hand them over. I cannot let go. I will always love them. I will always cherish them. I will always pursue them. I imagine the same is true for every parent reading these words today. Isn't a great comfort to know God feels this same way?

All those who believe in Jesus Christ are adopted as sons and daughters into the family of God. God becomes our father. We become His children. Like Israel, we too have sinned. We too have gone astray. We too have chased after other gods. Idols in our lives. Whatever we wrap our lives around that is NOT God. Thankfully, our Father is merciful and gracious. He disciplines us in His love. And when we feel His discipline, what should our response be? Hosea 10:12, “Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.” When we repent and turn back to God, we will find Him waiting with open arms. Ready to welcome us back home.

Readings for tomorrow: Joel 1-3, Revelation 4

December 17, 2021
Revival

Readings for today: [Joel 1-3, Revelation 4](#)

Joel is my favorite “minor prophet” of the Old Testament. Perhaps because I have witnessed firsthand the aftermath of a locust plague. I have been in areas suffering from tremendous drought. Seen the impact of famine. Talked with people whose “seeds shrivel under the clods” and whose “beasts groan” as they search in vain for food. I have prayed for them in their desperation. Cried out to God on their behalf. Fasted, wept, and mourned with them. I have also rejoiced with them when the rains finally came. When their crops flourished in the fields. Their herds grew sleek and fat. I have seen God restore the years the locusts had eaten and it is glorious.

Joel is talking about more than seedtime and harvest, of course. What he really is referring to is spiritual renewal and revival. Israel was languishing. She was struggling both physically and spiritually. The dry and barren wastelands that once were filled with so much life were simply an outward representation of what was taking place in their hearts. They had departed from God. They had left their source of life and were suffering as a result. Joel calls for revival. He calls for God’s people to return to the Lord with their whole hearts. He longs for the day when their spiritual life as a people will be renewed. We see some of the same dynamics in play today. There is a lot of talk in the American church about revival. A lot of prayers ascend asking God to bring renewal. To pour out His Spirit. To bless our nation. To awaken the slumbering hearts of God’s people across our great land. Why then does revival not come? Why does our culture continue it’s rapid descent into chaos? Why is there such a rise in hate and anger and rage? Why is God not answering our prayers?

According to Joel, the answer is quite clear. Repentance always precedes revival. We have not yet come to the end of ourselves. We have not yet exhausted our strength. We still believe on some level that it is up to us and our programs and our resources to bring this revival about. If we could just elect the right person. Just put the right programs in place. Just attend church more often. Just engage with more emotion in worship. We will seemingly do anything and everything to avoid falling on our faces, helpless before the Lord. We will do all we can to avoid acknowledging our failures, putting on sackcloth and ashes. We simply refuse to bow the knee, confess our sins both personal and corporate, and cry out to God. And this is why revival has not and will not come to the American church. We are too puffed up. Too prideful. Too divided. Too rich. Too comfortable. To consumer-driven. We spend more time complaining and arguing about worship styles like music than we do in heartfelt prayer. We spend far too much time guarding our hearts because we’ve been wounded rather than forgiving those who hurt us. We have such little faith and are not willing to put the time and effort into deepening our spiritual lives. I know these are broad generalizations but study after study confirms they are true.

Joel speaks prophetically to the American church. To our church. To my church. To my own heart.

“Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests; wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God! Because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.” (Joel 1:13-14)

“Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. Who

knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God?" (Joel 2:12-14)

"Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep and say, "Spare your people, O Lord, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" (Joel 2:15-17)

These are challenging words. Joel is unafraid to get in our face. They leave us no room for equivocation. We either accept them or reject them and the consequences of our decision is clear. Reject them to our own peril or accept them and receive God's promise.

"Be glad, O children of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord your God, for he has given the early rain for your vindication; he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the latter rain, as before. "The threshing floors shall be full of grain; the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you." (Joel 2:23-25)

"And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions." (Joel 2:28)

Friends, the answer we keep avoiding is simply this...surrender. Relinquishment. Submission. To God's will and God's ways and most importantly, God's love. Until we do this, we will not see revival come. Repentance is the precondition to revival. Surrender is the precondition to the pouring out of God's Spirit. We cannot receive from God until we open our hearts and unclench our fists. And this is a process. It's not something that happens easily. It is a daily decision we make to place ourselves before the Lord. Believe Him for who He is and what He has to say. Bow the knee and obey His commands.

Readings for tomorrow: Amos 1-3, Revelation 5

December 18, 2021
God's Justice

Readings for today: [Amos 1-3, Revelation 5](#)

We all want justice. We want those who do evil to get what they deserve. We want those who commit the crime to do the time. No one is above the law. No one should get a pass. It doesn't matter if they are a President or a member of the US Congress. A lawyer or a doctor. A pastor or a priest. Everyone is subject to the governing authorities and all should be held accountable for their actions. We believe this passionately. It's driving so many of our political debates right now. It's the underlying issue at stake in our conversations around race and poverty. Justice is all we seem to talk about these days.

But what about God's justice? What happens when God judges the nations of the earth? How do we feel when we read about God's judgment on Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, the Ammonites, and Moab for the violence and suffering they caused? What do we think when God applies the "eye for an eye" standard against those who transgress His Law? More often than not, we start to backpedal. We start making excuses. We reject God's justice as too harsh and unforgiving. We recoil at the awful and terrible suffering He inflicts. We begin to question His character and ask why He does not show mercy. Why do we have such a problem with God's justice?

I think it's because down deep - in the dark and secret places of our hearts that we don't want to talk about - we all know we are guilty. We all know we are sinful. We all know we make mistakes. We all know we've committed crimes against God and against our fellow human beings every single day. And while we seemingly have no problem crying out for justice against others, we certainly don't want that same standard applied to us. We don't think twice about attacking someone on social media but never want those same guns turned on us. We quickly impugn another person's character, question their motives, and assume the absolute worst of their intentions but we definitely want to be given a break. Shown a little grace. Given a little mercy. In short, we are so quick to judge others but so unwilling to judge ourselves.

The same was true for Israel. They were the people of God. They enjoyed a special relationship with their Creator. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth..." (Amos 3:2) God had chosen them from among the nations of the earth. He had shown them favor. Showered them with blessing. Given them His Law. And God's desire was that they would become a light to the pagan nations that surrounded them. They would serve as His instrument of salvation in the world. But Israel rejected God's Word. They rebelled against God's Law. They betrayed God at every turn. So God lays down His judgment on His own people. It is terrible and swift and complete. They would not escape God's justice.

What was true for the people of Israel was true for the churches of Revelation. What was true for the churches of Revelation remains true for us today. We all stand under God's judgment. We are all subject to God's justice. All of us are guilty. All of us stand condemned. Left on our own with no advocate to speak for us before the Father, all of us would suffer the same fate as the pagan nations that surrounded Israel or the Nicolaitans whom God hated. This is why we need Jesus. The Righteous One who took our place. Stood as our substitute. Took the punishment we deserved. Satisfied the demands of God's justice. Turned aside God's wrath. It is only through faith in Christ that we escape the wrath to come. This is the true message of Christmas. God loving the world so much He sends His only Son to suffer on our behalf. God desiring none to perish so He takes the sin of the world on His own

shoulders. God unwilling to watch the creature made in His image continue their descent into darkness, evil, and pain so He plunges into the depths to rescue. To save. Thanks be to God for the gift of Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: Amos 4-9, Revelation 6-7

December 20, 2021
Let Justice Roll Down

Readings for today: [Amos 4-9, Revelation 6-7](#)

“For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (1 Peter 4:17)

Judgment always begins with God’s people. The people called by God’s name are held to a higher standard. Having been delivered and set free from slavery to sin and death. Having been set apart as God’s treasured possession. Having been chosen as the object of God’s special devotion and love. God expects His people to be a light to the nations. Salt for the earth. A nation of priests interceding constantly on behalf of an unbelieving world. He expects His people to set an example for the nations. He expects them to conduct themselves in accordance with His will and His ways so as to show the nations what life looks like in His kingdom. When they fall short. When they sin. When they follow the ways of this world and take up the tools of oppression, violence, and injustice; God steps in. God will not be mocked nor will He allow His name to be defamed.

Amos is prophesying to the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. This was the golden age for the northern kingdom. Jeroboam II was the most powerful northern king, amassing great wealth and expanding their territory as far as it had ever gone. But there was something rotten at the heart of the kingdom. Injustice. Cruelty. Oppression. Violence. These were the hallmarks of his reign and God was watching. The righteous were sold for silver. The poor for a pair of sandals. Drunkenness. Sexual immorality. Idolatry all were rampant. God had given them multiple opportunities to repent. He had withheld the rain. Sent blight and mildew. Warfare on their borders. But still they didn’t return to the Lord.

Their main transgression was their mistreatment of the poor. “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy...” (Amos 4:1)
“Therefore because you trample on the poor and you exact taxes of grain from him...” (Amos 5:11)
“Hear this, you who trample on the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end, saying, “When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great and deal deceitfully with false balances, that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and sell the chaff of the wheat?” (Amos 8:4-6) Throughout the Scriptures, especially the prophets, God makes it clear that He judges nations primarily based on their treatment of the poor and afflicted. The less fortunate. Those who have the odds stacked against them. Nations that mistreat or refuse to care for the least of these are judged harshly. Those who show compassion and care are blessed.

America claims a Christian heritage. We sing songs asking for God’s blessing on our nation. We talk about a divine calling and how God has shown His favor on us. This can only be true insofar as we walk in obedience to God and serve as a light to the nations. A beacon of compassion and grace and hope for the world. This is why it is essential, for example, to solve crises like the one we face on our southern border in a humane and compassionate way. It’s why we must work for comprehensive immigration reform so that refugees and those seeking asylum can find refuge and safety. It’s why we must not separate children from parents and parents from children. It’s why we cannot accept unfettered or unregulated capitalism. It will grind the poor to dust, leaving them at the mercy of an ultra-Darwinian “rich get richer and poor get poorer” economic model. This is why we cannot accept the political status quo. The brinkmanship that exists between the extremes of both political parties.

The anger. The outrage. The hatred. The rancor. It's literally causing chaos and real lives are being hurt or even lost. This is not a Republican or Democrat issue. There's plenty of blame to go around. This is a gospel issue. A Kingdom of God issue. And we are fooling ourselves if we think we won't have to answer to a higher justice should we fail.

The closing words from Amos 5 are sobering. God says to His people, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5:21-24) In essence, God is saying, "My people are saying all the right things. Going through all the right motions. They worship. They praise. They give. But they do not love me with all their hearts. They are not seeking to walk in My ways. Until they do, I will not hear their prayers. I will not accept their offerings. I will not receive their worship. I will not bless their land." May we have the courage to repent. Confess. Seek God's face. Turn from our wicked ways. And re-commit ourselves to the Kingdom of God.

Readings for tomorrow: Obadiah, Jonah 1-3, Revelation 8

December 22, 2021
Dying to Self

Readings for today: [Jonah 4, Micah 1-2, Revelation 9](#)

Jonah is a great book. Especially when read in its historical context. The northern kingdom of Israel has just been destroyed by the Assyrian Empire. They've been scattered to the four winds. Forcibly resettled in new lands. Their way of life gone forever. And now we read of God's prophetic attempt to call those same Assyrians to repentance. Wait a minute?! The Assyrians? Seriously? The same people who terrorized and brutalized God's people? To say Jonah is a reluctant prophet is an understatement. He must have had a tremendously frustrating career. His own people refused to follow the Lord. They kept repeating the same mistakes over and over again. They were unfaithful. They were idolatrous. As a result, God sends the Assyrians to punish them. To drive them to their knees in humility and repentance. When that doesn't work, those same Assyrians become the instrument of God's righteous judgment on His own people. One can only imagine the hatred a man like Jonah would harbor for such people. They are Gentiles. Unbelievers. Unclean. Unworthy of God's grace. But then he receives the call to go and preach the gospel to them. What the heck?!

Jonah is a timely book for us to read as well. Our world is full of hatred and enmity. Social media gives full vent to our anger and rage. Judging others seems to be the order of the day and grace is in short supply. If someone disagrees with you, they are almost sub-human. Worthy only of contempt. They deserve to be unfriended, unfollowed, and publicly shamed. If someone questions you, they become a target. Attacked. Torn down. Their character assassinated. If someone doesn't affirm you, they get cut out of your life almost immediately. It is sad and disheartening and ultimately self-destructive.

Perhaps this is why Jesus calls us to love our enemies. Love humanizes. Love requires grace and forgiveness. Love requires listening and humility. Ultimately, love is selfless. It requires us to die to self in order to live for someone else. It forces us to take a good hard look at ourselves, our motives, our intentions, and lay them aside before engaging others. It celebrates diversity and assumes the best of others. It honors difference and dignifies those who disagree. It is deeply practical. And it should set Christians apart from the rest of the world.

Unfortunately, too many Christians seem to have forgotten this command. They explain it away. Rationalize it. Reject it. And the result is only more pain as the vicious cycle continues. Every Christian should ponder and pray over the closing words of Jonah... "When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.' But God said to Jonah, 'Do you do well to be angry for the plant?' And he said, 'Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.' And the Lord said, 'You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?'" (Jonah 4:8-11) We need to ask ourselves if we do well to be so angry? So enraged? We need to ask ourselves if we pity those who are like us more than those who are different? Pity those who agree with us more than those who disagree? Pity our friends more than our enemies? Should God not pity Democrats and Republicans? Liberals and conservatives? Whites and blacks? Asians and Latinos? Aboriginal people as well as immigrants? Should God not pity Americans as well as Mexicans? Israelis as well as Palestinians? North as well as South Koreans? Rich as well as poor? Privileged as well as under-privileged? The list is infinite but thankfully so is God's grace.

The way to life is the way of love. And the way of love is the way of sacrifice. We must die so others might live. We must lay down our lives so that others may thrive. We must give our lives away so that others might rise. Friends and enemies alike. Worthy and unworthy alike. This is what it means to follow Jesus. This is what it looks like to have the heart of God.

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 3, Revelation 10

December 23, 2021
The Mystery of God

Readings for today: [Micah 3, Revelation 10](#)

Yesterday I ran across a quote from an old preacher who said, “The miracle of Christ coming into the world is God’s guarantee that all His promises will be fulfilled.” I thought about that quote this morning as I read these words from the Book of Revelation. “And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there would be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.” (Revelation 10:5-7)

The image is powerful. A mighty angel standing astride the world. One foot on the sea. One foot on the land. Not one square inch of creation is allowed to stand apart. The ripple effect of what he has to say will impact the world. He opens his mouth and his voice thunders. Seven times the earth shakes at the sound of his words. What does the angel say? What do his words portend? We are not given that knowledge. John is not allowed to even write them down. We only know that the angel who delivered them swore by God’s great name that a day would come when the trumpet would sound and all would be revealed and the mystery of God fulfilled.

So what is the mystery of God? Is it a specific timeline of the last days? Is it the name of the Anti-Christ? Is it a roadmap of the future revealed to those who can string together obscure clues found throughout the Scriptures? Despite all the hype you might hear from different preachers who claim a special knowledge of God’s mystery not available to most people, it’s actually none of those things. How do I know? Because it’s referenced several times throughout the New Testament. In Colossians 2:2, the Apostle Paul is praying for the local church and local believers and he says, I want them to “reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery which is Christ.” In Ephesians 3:6-10, Paul describes the mystery as the “unsearchable riches of Christ” which are now proclaimed to the Gentiles. To the Corinthians, he says, “We impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God” which is Christ and Him crucified and he describes himself as a “servant of Christ and steward of the mysteries of God.” Building on Paul’s testimony, the church throughout her history has proclaimed the “central mystery of our faith” in liturgical worship gatherings...“Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”

Friends, the fundamental mystery foretold by the prophets of old, testified to by the apostles of the New Testament, and proclaimed by the church throughout the last two thousand years is Christ. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else. Christ has come. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ has ascended. Christ will come again. He is the heart of our faith. He is what makes our faith unique. He is hidden wisdom and knowledge of God. He is the power of God veiled in human flesh for all to see. He is the incarnate deity come to dwell with man. He is both the guarantee and fulfillment of the plan of God. In Christ, all the promises of God are Yes and Amen. This is what we celebrate on Christmas Eve every year. He is not a puzzle to put together. He is not a problem to solve. He is not a philosophy to study and understand. We cannot get our minds around Emmanuel. We can only bow before Him in wonder and awe and worship.

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 4-5, Revelation 11

December 24, 2021
Our Heavenly Father

Readings for today: [Micah 4-5, Revelation 11](#)

Many of us are parents. We have children we love dearly. We remember when we first held them in our arms. Fed them their first bottle. Changed their first diaper. We watched them learn to roll over, crawl, and walk. We listened with joy to their first words. As they grew, parenting became more challenging. As they developed their little personalities and their will started to clash with ours, they learned discipline. They took "time-outs." They were sent to their rooms. They were punished from time to time. They didn't like it. They cried. Screamed. Yelled. Threw their toys. It was hard to watch but we knew it was for their good. They continued to grow. Sometimes the conflict deepened. Their choices became more dangerous. More consequential. Skipping school. Getting involved in drugs. Running with the wrong crowd. Having violent altercations. Things got scary. We were forced to face our worst fears. It felt like we were losing our children. Sometimes things got so bad we had to ask them to leave the home. It was too dangerous for them to stay. They were kicked out of the nest. Forced to make their own way. They went to the streets. Got involved with an even rougher crowd. Sometimes ended up in prison or jail. Our grief only deepened. Our prayers for their salvation never ceased. We begged God to help them hit rock bottom so they could turn back to Him. Back to us. Find the help they needed and begin to recover. Sometimes that happened. We watched with utter joy as the prodigal returned home. Entered treatment. Got a good job. Left their old life behind.

Now imagine you aren't talking about just one child but millions. Imagine you are God and your children - the nations of Israel and Judah - have walked away from you. They are greedy. Spoiled. Unjust. Violent. Oppressive. They are barely recognizable as Your people. They even worship other gods. You've sent prophets to warn them. You've taken them through difficult experiences to discipline them. You've tried to draw them back only to have them walk out the door and slam it in your face over and over again. So you kick them out of the nest. Send them into exile. Use the nations of Assyria and Babylon to carry them off. Out of Jerusalem. Out of the Promised Land. With the hopes that they will hit rock bottom and one day return. You weep over them. You grieve over their choices. Your eyes fill with tears as you watch those you love suffer. But you know it is for their good. You know it is the only way they will ever turn back to You. You know you cannot protect them from themselves. They must learn the hard way. Their faces have to hit the pavement. They must come to the end of themselves. Recognize what they've done. Come to grips with all they've lost. Take responsibility for rejecting their Heavenly Father. Only when they hit rock bottom will they be ready for deliverance and salvation.

And that's exactly what you will do! For you will never abandon or forsake them. You will never leave them on their own. Like any parent, you long for their return. You wait expectantly at the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the prodigal. You run to them. You embrace them. You shower them with kisses. You put the signet ring on their finger. The robe on their back. And you throw the biggest party you can imagine to welcome them back home. Listen to how Micah describes it..."It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it, and many nations shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore;

but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken." (Micah 4:1-4) It's a beautiful thing, is it not?

Now imagine you aren't talking about millions of people but billions. God has declared His love and adopted into His family children from every tribe, tongue and nation. No longer focused on national Israel, God has created a new Israel. A spiritual Israel. Having raised up children for Himself from the stones as John the Baptist once said. This new Israel is made up of Jew and Gentile alike. Founded on the Twelve Tribes and Twelve Apostles. Governed by the Sermon on the Mount. Guided by the Great Commission. Jesus is Her Lord. Her Messiah. Her King.

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 6-7, Revelation 12

December 25, 2021
Biblical Justice

Readings for today: [Micah 6-7, Revelation 12](#)

“The Lord has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

There may not be a better verse for our time. Our nation is crying out for justice. Our world stands in desperate need of kindness. And humility before God is the key to it all. The people Micah was speaking to were going through all the right motions. They were bringing all the right sacrifices. Saying all the right prayers. Outwardly bowing before God in reverence. But God saw the hypocrisy of their hearts. He saw how their pious words didn’t match up with their actions. He saw the lack of integrity and the dis-integration of their lives. And they fell under His righteous judgment.

We have a choice, you see. Either we will do justice or God will. Either we will follow God’s ways and walk in obedience to God’s commands and live the lives He has created and called us to live or He will judge us for our sins. Friends, our sin impacts the world around us. It may be the people we live with. It may be the neighbors next door. The classmates at school. Co-workers at the office. Even people on the other side of the globe. Every word we say has a chance to give life or take life. Every dollar we spend has a chance to help or to hurt. Every vote we cast is a chance to bring God’s Kingdom a little closer or drive it further away. Every minute of every day is an opportunity to make an eternal difference in this world. Don’t buy it? Check out the studies on the impact of social media on mental health.

(<https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/blog/centre-mental-health-blog/anxiety-loneliness-fear-missing-out-social-media>) Now scroll through your posts from the last week. Are your contributions life-giving or life-stealing? Take a look at your budget or your online check register. Where are your dollars primarily going? Yes, we all have bills to pay. But what about the disposable income? Who’s getting the lion’s share? Most American Christians are giving less now than they did during the Great Depression! (<https://www.sharefaith.com/blog/2015/12/facts-christians-tithing>) And what about churches? What do they do with the dollars they receive? How many of them actually take those dollars and deploy them into the world to make a difference for the gospel? According to a survey by Christianity Today, most churches only give around 5% to missions outside their doors.

(<https://www.pnwumc.org/news/how-churches-spend-their-money>) Consider your voting record. Do you carefully consider the policy platform of the candidates you vote for or do you simply vote down the party line? Are you an advocate for policies that reflect God’s justice and mercy? Remember, God has entrusted the “dominion” of this world into our hands as human beings. He expects us to pursue justice in alignment with His will so that all creation can flourish under His divine love and care.

Of course, the temptation is to try to bring justice about in our own wisdom and strength. We see this happen all the time. We try to bring about God’s Kingdom without the king. Look at the public policies being proposed when it comes to the environment, policing, education, social policy, economic reform, etc. If you take a step back and think about it from a biblical perspective these policies sound a lot like heaven. Equal treatment for all. Equal justice for all. Equal access for all. Resource-sharing for all. No one left behind. Creation care. No need for any police. Surely all of us can affirm the hopes and dreams behind these aims? But we also know it’s unrealistic in a sinful world. We can pass all the laws and formulate all the policies we want but such things only restrain evil at best. They simply cannot change the human heart. The only way to drive out hate, anger, fear, and violence is to bow in humility before Jesus.

So here's the great news. If we humbly walk before God. If we commit ourselves to love kindness and mercy. If passionately pursue justice. God will hear us and forgive us and heal our land. Listen to how Micah ends his prophecy..."Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old." (Micah 7:18-20) How amazing is our God? His love is steadfast! His faithfulness never ends! His mercies are new every morning! He is our only hope in this world and the world to come.

Readings for tomorrow: Nahum 1-3, Habakkuk 1-2, Revelation 13-14

December 27, 2021
666

Readings for today: [Nahum 1-3, Habakkuk 1-2, Revelation 13-14](#)

“This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.” (Revelation 13:18)

Like a lot of the numbers in the book of Revelation (24 elders, 7 seals, 144,000, 7 heads, 10 horns, etc.), the number 666 has been the subject of quite a bit of controversy. Many attempts have been made through the centuries to identify the person associated with this number. Using the ancient system of gematria where numbers are substituted for letters in the alphabet, interpreters have suggested Nero, Kaiser Wilhelm and Hitler as possibilities. More than 100 names were proposed between 1560 and 1830 in Britain. Popes. Emperors. Other despotic rulers. All of them fall short. None of them fits exactly. So maybe the person is yet to be revealed? Those who take a futurist look at Revelation argue as much.

As someone who takes an “Amillennial” perspective on Revelation, I believe the number to be symbolic. It is actually the number of “sinful incompleteness.” A parody of the perfect number - “777” - which is often used to refer to the Trinity. Satan is not very creative. At best, he seeks to mimic everything God is or does in our world. But his ways are always corrupt and therefore always fall short. John is pointing this out by identifying Satan’s work in this world with the number 666. 666 falls short in literally every digit of 777 just as Satan falls short in every possibly way of the glory of God.

One of the reasons so many Christians have found the book of Revelation so compelling over the centuries is because of its transcultural relevance. Rather than identifying the Beast with one particular person in history, John uses him as an “archetype” to identify the Satanic systems of our world. Governments. Economies. Military powers. Social systems. All of them are corrupted by sin. All of them are influenced by Satan. All of them fall short of the perfection of God’s Kingdom. All of them bear the “mark of the beast” in this respect and must be rejected in favor of holding fast to Christ. John is encouraging these seven churches who are suffering under the “principalities and powers” of this world to place their hope in the world to come. To place their hope in the One who will rescue them from this present darkness when He comes again to make all things new. At that time, all systems marked by the beast will be destroyed and God will inaugurate His reign and rule over all the earth. 666 will give way to 777 as “the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” (Revelation 11:15)

We still live in a world influenced by Satan. All one has to do is turn on the news to see his corruption on display. Backbreaking poverty. Unjust systems that oppress. Terminal disease. Tragic death. Natural disasters. Violence manifesting itself all over the globe. We live in a scary, sinful world and part of our problem is we don’t take it seriously enough. Thankfully, God does. And there will come a day when every tear will be wiped away. Grief and pain will be no more. The former things of this “666” world will pass away as the “777” world comes.

Readings for tomorrow: Habakkuk 3, Zephaniah 1-3, Haggai 1-2, Revelation 15-16

December 28, 2021
The Call to Humility

Readings for today: [Habakkuk 3, Zephaniah 1-3, Haggai 1-2, Revelation 15-16](#)

I met a man once who gave up a six figure income here in the US to return to his native country of Rwanda where he did not draw a salary for three straight years. He went from being in the top 1% of the world's wealthiest people to the bottom 1% of the world's poor. He gave us security and safety to live in danger and place his family at risk. He gave up power and influence and privilege in one of the world's most significant NGO's to work among those who have been forgotten. When I expressed my admiration for such a sacrifice, his response was confusion. "What sacrifice?" he said. "My life is not my own. My life has never been my own. My life is in the hands of God to do with as He wills." This, friends, is true humility.

"But I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord..." (Zephaniah 3:12) It is hard to overstate the importance of humility to the Christian faith. Humility is what keeps us grounded before the Lord. Humility is what keeps us dependent on Him. Humility is what opens our hands and our hearts, allowing us to release those things in which we too often place our trust. Wealth. Health. Power. Privilege. Status. Authority. Pride. We are fools to place our trust in these things and yet it is so hard to resist temptation. We who have so much actually fall prey to our own desires. Our ability to gratify those desires instantaneously only serves to tighten our bonds. Thinking we are free, we choose to become slaves and there's nothing more pitiful than a free man or woman choosing to remain in bondage. Nothing more heartbreak than sitting in a cell with the door wide open, refusing to leave. This is the state we find ourselves in today. Our culture has made Self a "god" and the result is entitlement. Narcissism. Selfishness. Greed. Self-protection. And far too many of us worship at this altar.

So how do we resist this temptation? How can we uproot Self out of the center of our lives and re-focus our devotion around God? Humility. The fundamental recognition that my life is not my own. My future is not mine to determine. My hopes are not set on the limited horizons of this world. My happiness does not come from chasing temporal pleasures. Humility honors God as sovereign over all of life, including my own. Humility submits. Humility surrenders. Humility bows before the God of the universe and willingly entrusts Him with all that we are and all that we have. This is the secret that my friend understood. He owned nothing. Not his house. Not his salary. Not his job. Not his family. Not his lifestyle. Not his degrees. Not his professional success. Not his future. None of it was his to hold onto. All of it came from God and all of it was used by God as He wills for His good pleasure. So when God called him to leave Colorado Springs and move to Kigali to help his people recover from the genocide, he went. No questions asked. The Master called. My friend answered. The King issued a command. My friend obeyed. The Father made an appeal. My friend responded in faith. Though life has been much harder. Much more difficult. Much more painful and heartbreak. He has no regrets.

Humility. Not just an attitude of the heart. Not just a thought process in the mind. But a way of life. It means holding onto the things of this world loosely, knowing the Lord may require them at any time. It means holding onto our hopes and dreams loosely, knowing the Lord may change course at any time. It means holding onto even our pain and heartbreaks and suffering loosely, knowing the Lord often leads His people through such experiences to teach them of His sufficiency. It means holding onto our strength and safety and security loosely, knowing the Lord may demand even our lives at any time.

Now all this may sound very scary. Very frightening if this has not been your path. Here's the good news. God doesn't ask for blind obedience. He doesn't require us to step into the great unknown. He gives this promise to all who walk humbly before Him..."The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach. Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes," says the Lord." (Zephaniah 3:17-20) God can be trusted. God is true to His Word. His faithfulness never ends. His love never fails. Simply believe and let God take you by the hand today.

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 1-6, Revelation 17-18

December 29, 2021
Yahweh Remembers

Readings for today: [Zechariah 1-6, Revelation 17-18](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 7-9, Revelation 19

December 30, 2021
New Year's Resolutions

Readings for today: [Zechariah 7-9, Revelation 19](#)

What are your resolutions for the coming year? The promises you are making yourself? Is it to eat better? Exercise more regularly? Is it to stop drinking? Stop smoking? Conquer some other addiction in your life? Is it to dream bigger? Start a new business? Launch out on a new career? Is it to try something new? Learn something you never thought you could? Is it to make more time for those you love? Slow down? Simplify? All of these are good. All of them have their place. But what would happen if we challenged ourselves to go deeper? To make our New Year's Resolutions really count?

Listen to these words from the prophet Zechariah..."Thus says the Lord of hosts, render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart." (Zechariah 8:9-10) What would it look like in the coming year if we took these words to heart? How much would our lives change if we clung to the truth over all the lies? Plucked up the courage to be kind and merciful in a world of anger, bitterness, and hate? What if we cared for the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, and the poor rather than spending so much time and energy and resources on ourselves? What if we refused to give in to the temptation to tear others down, take revenge, or devise any other kind of evil in our hearts? Imagine for a moment every single Christian in the world committing themselves to these two verses for 2022. Imagine 3 billion people or more truly seeking to live these words out on a daily basis. Do you not think the world would change?

Of course, we have to deal with the reality that we all struggle to keep our resolutions. Studies show four out of five people end up breaking the commitments they make for the new year. Fully one-third barely make it past the first month. Why? Because we are often trying to accomplish these goals through sheer will-power alone. We try to make these changes without help. Without accountability. Without relying on anyone's strength but our own. This is where we always fall short. So where do we go to find the strength we need? I'm glad you asked! ;-) I love the words of the Psalmist, "Don't put your confidence in powerful people (including yourself!); there is no help for you there. When they breathe their last, they return to the earth, and all their plans die with them. But joyful are those who have the God of Israel as their helper, whose hope is in the Lord their God." (Psalms 146:3-5) Friends, God alone can give you the strength to change. He alone can give you the courage to keep your resolutions in the coming year. But they must be aligned with His will. They must be submitted to His way. And we must humbly surrender our lives into His hands.

What does that look like practically? How does that work itself out in our day to day? You've heard me say it before but I will definitely say it again (and again and again and again)...

- 1) Spend time with God every day. Intentionally place yourself before Him and ask God to help you look at your life and the world around you through His eyes. (In fact, you can sign up with us to read through the Bible again next year! Love to have you join us for yet another run through!)
- 2) Gather with a local church family in corporate worship each week. Put it on your schedule right now. Before all the activities and opportunities begin to crowd God out. God promises to meet His people wherever two or three or more are gathered in His name.

3) Find a small group of friends to intentionally pursue Jesus with. Pursue relationships of authenticity and transparency and accountability. Deep spiritual friendships don't happen by accident. They require intentionality and sacrifice.

4) Find a place to serve. Inside the church. Outside the church. Both. Find a way to get involved in God's mission to reach the lost and to teach others all He has commanded us as believers. We were created to carry God's image to the ends of the earth. Get in touch with why you were made.

Recently in some devotional reading, I ran across this great quote from 20th century Christian missionary and statesman, Frank Laubach... "If anybody were to ask me how to find God I should say at once, hunt out the deepest need you can find and forget all about your own comfort while you try to meet that need. Talk to God about it and He will meet you there. You will know it." I believe this with all my heart because I have seen and experienced it with my own eyes. When I have gotten engaged in God's mission in the world, I have found Him waiting for me there. My faith grows. My heart breaks. My eyes fill with tears. And I realize God is changing me. Giving me His heart of compassion. His heart of love. His heart of mercy. And I am overwhelmed with deep thankfulness. This thankfulness spills over into my everyday life. I become a better husband and father. A wiser pastor. A more faithful friend.

If you are wondering what you can do in the coming year to "make God your helper", let me encourage the following four spiritual practices...

Don't try to do 2022 on your own! Don't fall for the lie that somehow you are strong enough or bold enough or talented enough or stubborn enough. Surrender to the Lord and He will become your helper. He will be your strength and your courage. He will lift you up and carry you though!

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 10-14, Malachi 1-4, Revelation 20-22

December 31, 2021
Come, Lord Jesus!

Readings for today: [Zechariah 10-14, Malachi 1-4, Revelation 20-22](#)

Come, Lord Jesus!" Echoing Paul's famous phrase from 1 Corinthians 16:22 - "Maranatha" - John finishes his Revelation with what has become the heartcry of Christians for centuries. Come, Lord Jesus. Come soon. The vision John received has reached its climax. The new heavens and new earth have come. New Jerusalem has descended out of heaven. God in her midst. The gates are open continually for the nations of the earth to receive their blessing. The leaves of the trees that grow beside the river of God are for their healing. God has wiped away every tear. God has done away with every evil. There is no more crying or suffering or pain. God has made good on every promise. The Alpha has issued the final "Omega." What was once broken is now whole. What was ruined has now been restored. The incomplete has been brought to completion. It is truly finished. All things made new.

The delay of the "parousia" (2nd coming of Jesus) has plagued Christians for centuries. Why does Jesus not return? What is He waiting for? Many Christians have believed He was coming back in their lifetimes. As they looked around at the evil and suffering in their world, they could not imagine things getting worse. Many believed they were seeing the four horsemen of Revelation storming all over the earth bringing war, disease, famine, and death. Such has been the lot of humanity since Cain first slew Abel all those years ago. The Apostles were no different. John, Paul, Peter, along with most of the Christians of the first century, believed Jesus was returning in their lifetimes. It colors some of their advice to the local churches they were writing to. Scholars suggest you can even see Paul grappling with this delay, especially in his correspondence with the Corinthians and Thessalonians.

Why hasn't Jesus returned? Our atheist friends suggest it's because God doesn't exist. The "Father" Jesus so faithfully believed in is a myth. Jesus, as good as He was, made a mistake. Others suggest it's because the work of the church isn't finished. The Great Commission has yet to come to completion. We haven't preached the gospel to every tribe, tongue, and nation so not everyone has had a chance to hear the good news. Still others believe it's because the events of Revelation have yet to come to pass. The anti-Christ has yet to be revealed and as bad as things may be, they will get much worse before the end. To be honest, I have no idea why Jesus hasn't returned and can only assume it's because His plan for this world has yet to reach its fulfillment. Time doesn't pass for God like it does for us. While we are stuck in "chronological" time. Time as it ticks by. God exists in "Kairos" time. Time outside of time. Special time. Anointed time. The appropriate time. And only God knows where we stand according to His eternal clock.

What we can know for sure is that Jesus promised He would come. No less than three separate times, He affirms this to John in the last chapter of Revelation.

"And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." (Rev. 22:7)

"Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." (Rev. 22:12-13)

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." (Rev. 22:20)

And what should our response be? To come to Jesus. "The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price." (Revelation 22:17) Don't miss this! The movement goes both ways. God comes to us, we come to Him. God returns to us, we return to Him. God draws near to us, we draw near to Him. This is the pattern God has set since the first chapters of Genesis and it repeats itself here at the end of Revelation. This is God's great desire. It is the primary message He's been preaching through the entire Bible. It is the Word He longs for us to hear and receive and respond to by faith. So trust Him, friends! Accept His invitation! Believe in His name and receive the salvation He offers you by grace!