January 2022

January 02, 2022 Welcome
No Readings for today

January 3, 2022 Cultivation
Readings for today: Genesis 1-2

January 4, 2022 Glory
Readings for today: John 1:1-3, Psalm 8, Psalm 104

January 5, 2022 Where Art Thou?
Readings for today: Genesis 3-5

January 6, 2022 Favor with God
Readings for today: Genesis 6-7

January 7, 2022 Re-Creation
Readings for today: Genesis 8-9, Psalm 12

January 8, 2022 A Mighty Man
Readings for today: Genesis 10-11

January 10, 2022 God's Call
Readings for today: Genesis 12-13

January 11, 2022 Hagar
Readings for today: Genesis 14-16

January 12, 2022 Relationship with God
Readings for today: Genesis 17-19

January 13, 2022 God Will Provide
Readings for today: Genesis 20–23

January 14, 2022 God's Sovereignty
Readings for today: Genesis 24-26

January 15, 2022 Bargaining with God
Readings for today: Genesis 27-29

January 17, 2022 Self-Righteousness
Readings for today: Genesis 30-33

January 18, 2022 The Sin of Revenge
Readings for today: Genesis 34-37

January 19, 2022 Unlikely People
Readings for today: Genesis 38-40

January 20, 2022 God's Plan
Readings for today: Genesis 41-43

January 21, 2022 U-Turn
Readings for today: Genesis 44-46

January 22, 2022 When Saints Suffer
Readings for today: Genesis 47-50

January 24, 2022 Suffering
Readings for today: Job 1-5

January 25, 2022 Compassion
Readings for today: Job 6-9

January 26, 2022 Facing the Darkness
Readings for today: Job 10-13

January 27, 2022 The Problem of Pain
Readings for today: Job 14-17

January 28, 2022 Hearing Job
Readings for today: Job 18-21

January 29, 2022 Doubling Down
Readings for today: Job 22-24

January 31, 2022 The Danger of "Worm" Theology
Readings for today: Job 25-28

February 2022

February 1, 2022 The Danger of Self-Justification
Readings for today: Job 29-32

February 2, 2022 Redemptive Suffering
Readings for today: Job 33-36

February 3, 2022 God Speaks
Readings for today: Job 37-40:1-5, Psalm 19

February 4, 2022 Limits
Readings for today: Job 40:6-42:17, Psalm 29

February 5, 2022 Unsung Heroines
Readings for today: Exodus 1-4

February 7, 2022 Getting to Know God
Readings for today: Exodus 5-9

February 8, 2022 Hard Hearts
Readings for today: Exodus 10-13

February 9, 2022 No Whining
Readings for today: Exodus 14-18

February 10, 2022 Meeting God
Readings for today: Exodus 19-21

February 11, 2022 Divine Principles
Readings for today: Exodus 22-24

February 12, 2022 Tabernacle
Readings for today: Exodus 25-28

February 14, 2022 CHIEF OF SINNERS
Readings for today: Exodus 29-32

February 15, 2022 THE NAME OF THE LORD
Readings for today: Exodus 33-36

February 16, 2022 Sacred, Ordinary Things
Readings for today: Exodus 37-40

February 17, 2022 Offering
Readings for today: Leviticus 1-4

February 18, 2022 The Big Picture
Readings for today: Leviticus 5-7

February 19, 2022 Worship
Readings for today: Leviticus 8-10

February 21, 2022 Living Sacrifices
Readings for today: Leviticus 11-14

February 22, 2022 Sexual Purity
Readings for today: Leviticus 15-18

February 23, 2022 The Golden Rule
Readings for today: Leviticus 19-22

February 24, 2022 Sabbath
Readings for today: Leviticus 23-25

February 25, 2022 The Glory of God's Law
Readings for today: Leviticus 26-27, Numbers 1-2

February 26, 2022 God's Treasured Possession
Readings for today: Numbers 3-5

February 28, 2022 Spiritual Unity
Readings for today: Numbers 6-9

March 2022

March 1, 2022 Humble Leadership
Readings for today: Numbers 10-13, Psalm 90

March 2, 2022 Power of Intercession
Readings for today: Numbers 14-16, Psalm 95

March 3, 2022 Pointing People to Jesus
Readings for today: Numbers 17-20

March 4, 2022 The Language God Speaks
Readings for today: Numbers 21-24

March 5, 2022 Succession Planning
Readings for today: Numbers 25-28

March 7, 2022 God's Judgment
Readings for today: Numbers 29-32

March 8, 2022 Death Penalty
Readings for today: Numbers 33-36

March 9, 2022 Testimony
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 1-3

March 10, 2022 The Greatest Prayer
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 4-7

March 11, 2022 Remember
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 8-11

March 12, 2022 God's Plan for Poverty
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 12-15

March 14, 2022 Don't Believe the Hype!
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 16-19

March 15, 2022 Blessings and Curses
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 20-23

March 16, 2022 First-Fruits
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 24-27

March 17, 2022 Simple Life
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 28-30

March 18, 2022 The Song We Sing…
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 31-34

March 19, 2022 The Significance of Insignificance
Readings for today: Joshua 1-2, Psalm 105

March 21, 2022 Altars
Readings for today: Joshua 3-6

March 22, 2022 Collective Guilt
Readings for today: Joshua 7-10

March 23, 2022 Keeping Perspective
Readings for today: Joshua 11-14

March 24, 2022 Finishing Strong
Readings for today: Joshua 15-18

March 25, 2022 Witness
Readings for today: Joshua 19-22

March 26, 2022 Choose this Day…
Readings for today: Joshua 23-24, Judges 1

March 28, 2022 The Power of One
Readings for today: Judges 2-5

March 29, 2022 The Work of Renewal
Readings for today: Judges 6-9

March 30, 2022 Jephthah's Vow
Readings for today: Judges 10-13

March 31, 2022 Flawed Heroes
Readings for today: Judges 14-18

April 2022

April 1, 2022 **The Horror**
Readings for today: Judges 19-21

April 2, 2022 **Great Redeemer**
Readings for today: Ruth 1-4

April 4, 2022 **A Mother's Devotion**
Readings for today: 1 Samuel 1-3

April 5, 2022 **Talisman**
Readings for today: 1 Samuel 4-8

April 6, 2022 **Visions and Dreams**
Readings for today: 1 Samuel 9-12

April 7, 2022 **First Love**
Readings for today: 1 Samuel 13-16

April 8, 2022 **Trusting God**
Readings for today: 1 Samuel 17-20, Psalm 59

April 9, 2022 **Godly Confidence**
Readings for today: 1 Samuel 21-24, Psalm 91

April 11, 2022 **Authentic Prayer**
Readings for today: Psalms 7, 27, 31, 34, 52

April 12, 2022 **Resiliency**
Readings for today: Psalms 56, 120, 140-142

April 13, 2022 **Love your Enemies**
Readings for today: 1 Samuel 25-27, Psalms 17, 73

April 14, 2022 **God is our Helper**
Readings for today: Psalms 35, 54, 63, 18

April 15, 2022 **Spiritual Warfare**
Readings for today: 1 Samuel 28-31, 1 Chronicles 10

April 16, 2022 **Lift Your Eyes!**
Readings for today: Psalms 121, 123-125, 128-130

April 18, 2022 **The Experience of Holy Saturday**
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 1-4

April 19, 2022 **Emotional Roller Coaster**
Readings for today: Psalms 6, 9-10, 14, 16, 21

April 20, 2022 Biblical Genogram
Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 1-2, Psalms 43-44

April 21, 2022 God's Extravagant Gifts
Readings for today: Psalms 49, 84-85, 87

April 22, 2022 Communion of Saints
Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 3-5

April 23, 2022 Evangelism
Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 6, Psalms 36, 39, 77-78

April 25, 2022 The Dark Night of the Soul
Readings for today: Psalms 81, 88, 92-93

April 26, 2022 Cultural History and Identity
Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 7-9

April 27, 2022 The Power of Unity
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 5:1-10, 1 Chronicles 11-12, Psalms 133

April 28, 2022 Worship
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 5:11-6:23, 1 Chronicles 13-16

April 29, 2022 Integrity
Readings for today: Psalms 15, 23-25, 47

April 30, 2022 Our God Is Too Small
Psalms 89, 96, 100-101, 107

MAY 2022

May 2, 2022 The Deep Work of the Spirit
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 17, Psalms 1-2, 33, 127, 132

May 3, 2022 Soli Deo Gloria
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 8-9, 1 Chronicles 18

May 4, 2022 Soli Deo Gloria?
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 10, 1 Chronicles 19, Psalms 20, 53, 60, 75

May 5, 2022 His Story
Readings for today: Psalms 65-67, 69-70

May 6, 2022 Abuse
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 11-12, 1 Chronicles 20, Psalms 51

May 7, 2022 Confession
Readings for today: Psalms 32, 86, 102-103, 122

May 9, 2022 Dysfunction
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 13-15

May 10, 2022 The Lord is our Shield
Readings for today: Psalms 3-4, 13, 28, 55

May 11, 2022 Failing to Forgive
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 16-18

May 12, 2022 "40"
Readings for today: Psalms 26, 40-41, 58, 61-62, 64

May 13, 2022 Division
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 19-21, Psalms 5, 38, 42

May 14, 2022 Thy will or thy will?
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 22-23, Psalms 57

May 16, 2022 God Reigns!
Readings for today: Psalms 97-99

May 17, 2022 Addiction
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 24, 1 Chronicles 21-22, Psalms 30

May 18, 2022 Suffering
Readings for today: Psalms 108-109

May 19, 2022 Putting your House in Order
Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 23-26

May 20, 2022 The Wondrous Works of God
Readings for today: Psalms 131, 138-139, 143-145

May 21, 2022 Generosity
Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 27-29, Psalms 68

May 23, 2022 A Life of Blessing
Readings for today: Psalms 111-118

May 24, 2022 Resisting Evil
Readings for today: 1 Kings 1-2, Psalms 37, 71, 94

May 25, 2022 Jesus is Better
Readings for today: Psalms 119:1-88

May 26, 2022 Ask and You Shall Receive
Readings for today: 1 Kings 3-4, 2 Chronicles 1, Psalm 72

May 27, 2022 Wisdom vs. Foolishness
Readings for today: Psalms 119:89-176

May 28, 2022 Sex and God
Readings for today: Song of Solomon 1:1-5:1

May 30, 2022 Desperate for God
Readings for today: Song of Solomon 5:2-7:13, 8:14, Psalms 45

May 31, 2022 Living with Wisdom
Readings for today: Proverbs 1-4

JUNE 2022

June 1, 2022 Temptation
Readings for today: Proverbs 5-8

June 2, 2022 The Integrated Life
Readings for today: Proverbs 9-12

June 3, 2022 Righteousness
Readings for today: Proverbs 13-16

June 4, 2022 The Power of Words
Readings for today: Proverbs 17-20

June 6, 2022 Pride
Readings for today: Proverbs 21-24

June 7, 2022 Building God's House
Readings for today: 1 Kings 5-6, 2 Chronicles 2-3

June 8, 2022 A Model Prayer
Readings for today: 1 Kings 7-8, Psalms 11

June 9, 2022 Revival
Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 4-7, Psalms 134, 136

June 10, 2022 Give God the Praise He Deserves
Readings for today: Psalms 146-150

June 11, 2022 Define the Relationship
Readings for today: 1 Kings 9, 2 Chronicles 8, Proverbs 25-26

June 13, 2022 The Impact of Godly Leadership
Readings for today: Proverbs 27-29

June 14, 2022 Immortality
Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 1-6

June 15, 2022 Perspective
Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 7-12

June 16, 2022 The Love of Money
Readings for today: 1 Kings 10-11, 2 Chronicles 9, Proverbs 30-31

June 17, 2022 It's All About Me
Readings for today: 1 Kings 12, 2 Chronicles 10

June 18, 2022 True Worship
Readings for today: 1 Kings 13-14, 2 Chronicles 11-12

June 20, 2022 Faith of our Fathers
Readings for today: 1 Kings 15:1-24, 2 Chronicles 13-16

June 21, 2022 Spiritual Entropy
Readings for today: 1 Kings 15:25-34, 1 Kings 16, 2 Chronicles 17

June 22, 2022 Miracles
Readings for today: 1 Kings 17-19

June 23, 2022 No Fear
Readings for today: 1 Kings 20-21

June 24, 2022 Singing our Faith
Readings for today: 1 Kings 22, 2 Chronicles 18-20

June 25, 2022 Miracles: What's God's Point?
Readings for today: 2 Kings 1-4

June 27, 2022 One Person's Impact
Readings for today: 2 Kings 5-8:15

June 28, 2022 Generational Sin
Readings for today: 2 Kings 8:16-29, 2 Chronicles 21:1-22:9

June 29, 2022 Justice and Righteousness
Readings for today: 2 Kings 9-11, 2 Chronicles 22:10-23:21

June 30, 2022 Covenantal Faithfulness
Readings for today: 2 Kings 12-13, 2 Chronicles 24

JULY 2022

July 1, 2022 The Danger of Idolatry
Readings for today: 2 Kings 14-15, 2 Chronicles 25-27

July 2, 2022 Love your Enemies
Readings for today: Jonah 1-4

July 4, 2022 Loving our Nation
Readings for today: Amos 1-5

July 5, 2022 Self-Reflection
Readings for today: Amos 6-9

July 6, 2022 God's Great Faithfulness
Readings for today: Hosea 1-5

July 7, 2022 True Repentance
Readings for today: Hosea 6-9

July 8, 2022 The Tenderness of God
Readings for today: Hosea 10-14

July 9, 2022 A Political Faith
Readings for today: Isaiah 1-4

July 11, 2022 Promised Land
Readings for today: Isaiah 5-8

July 12, 2022 Seeing the Light
Readings for today: Isaiah 9-12

July 13, 2022 Lessons from Megiddo
Readings for today: Micah 1-4

July 14, 2022 Justice. Love. Kindness. Humility.
Readings for today: Micah 5-7

July 15, 2022 Samaria
Readings for today: 2 Kings 16-17, 2 Chronicles 28

July 16, 2022 Refuge
Readings for today: Isaiah 13-17

July 18, 2022 Mount Zion
Readings for today: Isaiah 18-22

July 19, 2022 Wastelands
Readings for today: Isaiah 23-26

July 20, 2022 The House of the Lord
Readings for today: 2 Kings 18:1-8, 2 Chronicles 29-31, Psalms 48

July 21, 2022 Cornerstone
Readings for today: Isaiah 27-30

July 22, 2022 Escape Routes
Readings for today: Isaiah 31-35

July 23, 2022 Empty Threats
Readings for today: Isaiah 36-37, 2 Kings 18:9-37, 19, 2 Chronicles 32:1-23, Psalms 76

July 25, 2022 Healing Prayer
Readings for today: Isaiah 38-39, 2 Kings 20:1-21, 2 Chronicles 32:24-33

July 26, 2022 The Comfort of God
Readings for today: Isaiah 40-42, Psalms 46

July 27, 2022 Calling
Readings for today: Isaiah 43-45, Psalms 80

July 28, 2022 Lean on God
Readings for today: Isaiah 46-49, Psalms 135

July 29, 2022 Suffering Servant
Readings for today: Isaiah 50-53

July 30, 2022 Full Devotion
Readings for today: Isaiah 54-58

AUGUST 2022

August 1, 2022 Freedom Comes With Responsibility
Readings for today: Isaiah 59-63

August 2, 2022 Potter's Hand
Readings for today: Isaiah 64-66

August 3, 2022 Leadership Impact
Readings for today: 2 Kings 21, 2 Chronicles 33

August 4, 2022 The Honor of God
Readings for today: Nahum 1-3

August 5, 2022 God's Vision for the Nations
Readings for today: Zephaniah 1-3

August 6, 2022 Life isn't Fair
Readings for today: 2 Kings 22-23, 2 Chronicles 34-35

August 8, 2022 How Long, O Lord?
Readings for today: Habakkuk 1-3

August 9, 2022 Faith over Fear
Readings for today: Joel 1-3

August 10, 2022 Godly Courage
Readings for today: Jeremiah 1-4

August 11, 2022 The Grief of God
Readings for today: Jeremiah 5-8

August 12, 2022 True Greatness
Readings for today: Jeremiah 9-12

August 13, 2022 A Prophet's Pain
Readings for today: Jeremiah 13-16

August 15, 2022 Logical Consequences
Readings for today: Jeremiah 17-20

August 16, 2022 The Battle for the Heart
Readings for today: Jeremiah 21-24

August 17, 2022 The Patience of God
Readings for today: Jeremiah 25-28

August 18, 2022 God's Plan
Readings for today: Jeremiah 29-32

August 19, 2022 God's Word
Readings for today: Jeremiah 33-37

August 20, 2022 Entitlement
Readings for today: Jeremiah 38-40, Psalms 74, 79

August 22, 2022 Sabbath
Readings for today: 2 Kings 24-25, 2 Chronicles 36:1-21, Jeremiah 52

August 23, 2022 Fear or Faith?
Readings for today: Jeremiah 41-44

August 24, 2022 Family Feud
Readings for today: Obadiah 1, Psalms 82-83

August 25, 2022 The Lord's Discipline
Readings for today: Jeremiah 45-48

August 26, 2022 Biblical Archeology
Readings for today: Jeremiah 49-50

August 27, 2022 The Language of Suffering
Readings for today: Jeremiah 51, Psalms 137

August 29, 2022 Lament
Readings for today: Lamentations 1:1-3:36

August 30, 2022 Next Steps
Readings for today: Lamentations 3:37-5:22

August 31, 2022 Seeing God's Glory
Readings for today: Ezekiel 1-4

SEPTEMBER 2022

September 1, 2022 The End of God's Judgment
Readings for today: Ezekiel 5-8

September 2, 2022 Seeking God's Glory
Readings for today: Ezekiel 9-12

September 3, 2022 The Bride of Christ
Readings for today: Ezekiel 13-16

September 5, 2022 Divine Justice
Readings for today: Ezekiel 17-20

September 6, 2022 We Want Justice!
Readings for today: Ezekiel 21-24

September 7, 2022 Never Rejoice at Another Person's Fall
Readings for today: Ezekiel 25-28

September 8, 2022 No Other Gods
Readings for today: Ezekiel 29-32

September 9, 2022 The Gift of God's Spirit
Readings for today: Ezekiel 33-36

September 10, 2022 Can Dry Bones Live Again?
Readings for today: Ezekiel 37-40

September 12, 2022 The Glorious Return of the Lord
Readings for today: Ezekiel 41-44

September 13, 2022 Living Waters
Readings for today: Ezekiel 45-48

September 14, 2022 Living God's Truth
Readings for today: Daniel 1-3

September 15, 2022 Power of Prayer
Readings for today: Daniel 4-6

September 16, 2022 Visions and Dreams
Readings for today: Daniel 7-9

September 17, 2022 Apocalypse
Readings for today: Daniel 10-12

September 19, 2022 Rebuilding
Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 36:22-23, Ezra 1-3

September 20, 2022 Faith over Fear
Readings for today: Ezra 4-6

September 21, 2022 PUTTING GOD FIRST
Readings for today: Haggai 1-2

September 22, 2022 God is Gracious
Readings for today: Zechariah 1-7

September 23, 2022 God is with you
Readings for today: Zechariah 8-14

September 24, 2022 For Such A Time As This…
Readings for today: Esther 1-5

September 26, 2022 Divine Reversals
Readings for today: Esther 6-10

September 27, 2022 Hard Questions
Readings for today: Malachi 1-4, Psalm 50

September 28, 2022 Overcoming Cultural Distance
Readings for today: Ezra 7-10

September 29, 2022 Power of Prayer
Readings for today: Nehemiah 1-4

September 30, 2022 Punching Down
Readings for today: Nehemiah 5-7

OCTOBER 2022

October 1, 2022 God's Story, Our Story
Readings for today: Nehemiah 8-10

October 3, 2022 A Futile Hope
Readings for today: Nehemiah 11-13, Psalm 126

October 4, 2022 God's Answer to Our Deepest Cry
Readings for today: Psalm 106, John 1:4-14

October 5, 2022 The Calling of God
Readings for today: Matthew 1, Luke 1:1-2:38

October 6, 2022 Reaction to Jesus
Readings for today: Matthew 2, Luke 2:39-52

October 7, 2022 John the Baptist
Readings for today: Matthew 3, Mark 1:1-11, Luke 3, John 1:15-34

October 8, 2022 Temptation
Readings for today: Matthew 4:1-22, 13:54-58, Mark 1:12-20, Mark 6:1-6, Luke 4:1-30, 5:1-11, John 1:35-51, 2:1-12

October 10, 2022 Signs and Wonders
Readings for today: Matthew 4:23-25, 8:14-17, Mark 1:21-39, Luke 4:31-44

October 11, 2022 Humility
Readings for today: John 3-5

October 12, 2022 Mercy over Sacrifice
Readings for today: Matthew 8:1-4, 9:1-17, 12:1-21, Mark 1:40-45, 2:1-3:21, Luke 5:12-6:19

October 13, 2022 Building a Strong Foundation
Readings for today: Matthew 5-7, Luke 6:20-49, 11:1-13

October 14, 2022 Dining with Jesus
Readings for today: Matthew 8:5-13, 11:1-30, Luke 7

October 15, 2022 A House Divided
Readings for today: Matthew 12:22-50, Mark 3:22-35, Luke 8:19-21, 11:14-54

October 17, 2022 The Kingdom of God
Readings for today: Matthew 13:1-53, Mark 4:1-34, Luke 8:1-18

October 18, 2022 Riding Out the Storm
Readings for today: Matthew 8:18-34, 9:18-38, Mark 4:35-41, 5:1-43, Luke 8:22-56, 9:57-62

October 19, 2022 Sent Ones
Readings for today: Matthew 10, 14, Mark 6:7-56, Luke 9:1-17, John 6

October 20, 2022 Honor/Shame Culture
Readings for today: Matthew 15, Mark 7, 8:1-10

October 21, 2022 The Cross-Shaped Life
Readings for today: Matthew 16, Mark 8:11-38, 9:1, Luke 9:18-27

October 22, 2022 True Greatness
Readings for today: Matthew 17-18, Mark 9:2-50, Luke 9:28-56

October 24, 2022 No Condemnation
Readings for today: John 7-9

October 25, 2022 Cutting Through the Noise
Readings for today: Luke 10, John 10:1-1:54

October 26, 2022 Honor God
Readings for today: Luke 12:1-13:30

October 27, 2022 The Mission of Jesus
Readings for today: Luke 14-15

October 28, 2022 All the Wrong Questions
Readings for today: Matthew 19, Mark 10:1-31, Luke 16:1-18:30

October 29, 2022 The Tragedy of Transactional Thinking
Readings for today: Matthew 20, Mark 10:32-52, Luke 18:31-19:27

October 31, 2022 Rightful Ownership
Readings for today: Matthew 21:1-22, 26:6-13, Mark 11:1-26, 14:3-9, Luke 19:28-48, John 2:13-25, 11:55-57, 12:1-36

November 2022

November 01, 2022 The Patience of God
Readings for today: Matthew 21:23-22:14, Mark 11:27-12:12, Luke 20:1-18, John 12:37-50

November 2, 2022 Questioning Jesus
Readings for today: Matthew 22:15-23:39, Mark 12:13-44, Luke 20:19-21:4, 13:31 -35

November 3, 2022 Reality Check
Readings for today: Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, Luke 21:5-38

November 4, 2022 Humility
Readings for today: Matthew 26:1-5, 14-35, Mark 14:1-2, 10-31, Luke 22:1-38, John 13

November 5, 2022 Spiritual Unity
Readings for today: John 14-17

November 7, 2022 What Would Jesus Pray?
Reading for today: Matthew 26:36-75, Mark 14:32-72, Luke 22:39-71, John 18:1-27

November 8, 2022 Who Crucified Jesus?
Readings for today: Matthew 27:1-31, Mark 15:1-20, Luke 23:1-25, John 18:28-40, 19:1-16

November 9, 2022 The Tomb
Readings for today: Matthew 27:32-66, Mark 15:21-47, Luke 23:26-56, John 19:17-42, Psalm 22

November 10, 2022 Resurrection
Readings for today: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21

November 11, 2022 Repentance
Readings for today: Acts 1-4, Psalm 110

November 12, 2022 Reformation
Readings for today: Acts 5-8

November 14, 2022 The Beauty of a Multi-Cultural Community
Readings for today: Acts 9-11

November 15, 2022 Missionaries
Readings for today: Acts 12-14

November 16, 2022 Authentic Faith
Readings for today: James 1-5

November 17, 2022 What does it Mean to be Truly Human?
Readings for today: Galatians 1-3

November 18, 2022 Exercising Christian Freedom
Readings for today: Galatians 4-6

November 19, 2022 Navigating Church Conflict
Readings for today: Acts 15-16

November 21, 2022 Defending our Faith
Readings for today: Acts 17:1-18:18

November 22, 2022 World-Changing Faith
Readings for today: 1 Thessalonians 1-5

November 23, 2022 Persecution
Readings for today: 2 Thessalonians 1-3

November 24, 2022 A Social/Political Gospel
Readings for today: Acts 18:19-19:41

November 25, 2022 Thanksgiving
Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 1-4

November 26, 2022 And Such Were Some of You…
Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 5-8

November 28, 2022 Laying Down Our Lives
Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 9-11

November 29, 2022 The Body of Christ
Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 12-14

November 30, 2022 The Gospel
Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 15-16

December 2022

December 1, 2022 Rejecting Self-Sufficiency
Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 1-4

December 2, 2022 The Hard Work of Reconciliation
Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 5-9

December 3, 2022 Areas of Influence
Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 10-13

December 5, 2022 The Power of the Gospel
Readings for today: Acts 20:1-3, Romans 1-4

December 6, 2022 A Story of Life and Death
Readings for today: Romans 5-8

December 7, 2022 The Radical Inclusivity of God
Readings for today: Romans 9-12

December 8, 2022 A Heavenly Kingdom
Readings for today: Romans 13-16

December 9, 2022 Sent
Readings for today: Acts 20:4-38, 21:1-23:35

December 10, 2022 The Resurrection Changes Everything
Readings for today: Acts 24-26

December 12, 2022 Evangelism and Mission
Readings for today: Acts 27-28

December 13, 2022 Pressing On
Readings for today: Philippians 1-4

December 14, 2022 Put on Christ
Readings for today: Philemon 1, Colossians 1-4

December 15, 2022 So Many Promises…
Readings for today: Ephesians 1-4

December 16, 2022 Walk in the Light
Readings for today: Ephesians 5-6, Titus 1-3

December 17, 2022 Keep the Main Thing, the Main Thing
Readings for today: 1 Timothy 1-6

December 19, 2022 Following the Example of Christ
Readings for today: 1 Peter 1-5

December 20, 2022 Incarnation
Readings for today: Hebrews 1-4

December 21, 2022 The Best Story
Readings for today: Hebrews 5-8

December 22, 2022 Endurance
Readings for today: Hebrews 9-13

December 23, 2022 God-Breathed
Readings for today: 2 Timothy 1-4

December 24, 2022 Trail Maintenance
Readings for today: 2 Peter 1-3, Jude 1

December 26, 2022 The Meaning of Christmas
Readings for today: 1 John, 2 John, 3 John

December 27, 2022 A New Song
Readings for today: Revelation 1-5

December 28, 2022 How Long?
Readings for today: Revelation 6-10

December 29, 2022 Symbolism
Readings for today: Revelation 11-13

December 30, 2022 Blaming God
Readings for today: Revelation 14-18

December 31, 2022 Come, Lord Jesus
Readings for today: Revelation 19-22

January 2, 2022

Bible in a Year 2022

Happy New Year! Welcome to those who are returning for yet another walk-thru of the Bible and a special welcome to those who are new! We're glad you've joined us! Greg Daniels and I have been blessed to lead this group for several years now and have loved having a front row seat to so many growing in their faith. God is good and He honors every single moment we spend with Him in His Word so with that in mind, here are a few suggestions as you begin to help you have a successful year…

1) Pray before reading each day. Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you and reveal more of Himself to you through His Word. Ask Him for wisdom and understanding as you read and what it might be that He would have you take away each day.

2) Read devotionally. What does that mean? It means reading through the Bible like this is not intended to provide an in-depth study. Simply pay attention to what words or phrases stick out to you and prayerfully meditate on what God may be saying to you.

3) Journal. Journaling is a way of meditating and/or reflecting on what God may be saying to you. I've been doing it for years and it has been super helpful in helping me gather and focus my thoughts. In fact, many of the devotionals I write come straight out of my journal. It can also give you a record to look back on at the end of the year as to what God has shared with you.

4) Grace. Give yourself a lot of grace. Life happens. We all know that. Don't beat yourself up if you miss a day or get bogged down in certain places…looking at you, Leviticus! ;-) Don't be afraid to skip ahead if you get too far behind.

5) Ask any question God lays on your heart. Reading the Bible should raise all kinds of issues. There is a lot in there that is confusing. You might find yourself wrestling with all sorts of doubts or fears. This is normal. It happens to me almost every year. ;-) Ask your questions. Share your doubts. Don't be afraid to talk about your struggles or confusion. This is a safe community to do that with.

6) Feel free to shoot Greg or myself any personal questions you may not want to share with the group. We're here to help! (Statedclerk@epcwest.org or doug@pepc.org)

7) Be gentle and kind to each other. We all have a share in making this a safe group. Let's make sure to be kind and gentle and encouraging in our responses to one another. Give people the space to struggle and be where they are on the journey. If things get too much, take a break, then dive back in.

Again, really thankful for the opportunity to take this journey with you, friends! Feel free to invite everyone you're connected with to join us! The more, the merrier!

Happy New Year!

Doug

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January 3, 2022

Cultivation

Readings for today: Genesis 1-2

Father, by Your Holy Spirit, open Your Word to us that we may hear Your voice, learn what You would have us learn, and grow ever deeper in our faith. We pray this in the name of Jesus, amen.

Human beings are made to cultivate. Cultivate the earth. Cultivate the Garden. Cultivate and care for all of life. In recent years, most of my focus has been on the creation story of Genesis one. The rhythm of morning and evening. Everything good and perfect. The Lord God speaking the universe into existence. Creating humanity in His own image. Giving us dominion over all He has made. Calling us to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. However, this year I decided to read the Bible in the old King James English. It translates the Hebrew "be fruitful, multiply, and replenish the earth…" That word "replenish" stuck with me as I turned the page and began reading chapter two. There it seems clear that humanity has a key role to play in cultivating all God has made. Everything was prepared. The ground was set. The seeds were planted. But nothing had yet grown because there had been no rain and "there was no man to work the ground." (2:5) This does not mean that somehow God was helpless or too prideful to get His hands dirty, rather it suggests an invitation. A divine plan. God creating us for a purpose. To be the cultivators of all He has made. To be the stewards of all He has formed and fashioned. To care for the good and perfect world He has created. Remember, God is at rest. His work is complete. He now sits enthroned over all He has made and sends us – His servants – out to work according to His sovereign will. It is humanity's job to work and keep the Garden. It is humanity's job to name the animals the Lord God has made. It is humanity's job to make sure the earth is continually replenished and tended and cultivated so that it will reflect the beauty and order and glory God intends.

So what happened? When did we make the turn from cultivators to exploiters? From stewards to squatters? From those focused on caring and replenishing to those focused on using creation to satisfy our own selfishness and greed? We'll read about that tomorrow in Genesis 3 but the stage is set here in chapter two. Humanity will only retain her divine vocation insofar as she submits to God. In every instance save one, humanity is able to enjoy the fruit of her labor. As she cultivates, she is nourished. As she stewards, she is fed. As she cares for all God has made, the Garden itself provides for all her needs. However, there is one tree humanity is to cultivate but never taste. There is one tree she is to steward but whose fruit she is to never eat. She is to care for this tree but never experience it's delights. This is her single act of submission to God. It is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and it's fruit is forbidden. Who knows how long Adam and Eve passed by this tree as they went about their daily chores? Days? Months? Years? Eons? We have no idea how long Adam and Eve cultivated and tended and replenished the earth under God's direction. We only know there came a day when they stopped on their way to work. Listened to a crafty serpent. Gave into temptation. And all creation fell into ruin.

Thankfully, that is not the end of the story. In Jesus Christ, we see the 2nd Adam. Humanity as she should be. Perfectly submitted to the will of His Father. A Cultivator. A Steward. A Man who lived out His vocation to care for all God has made. Everywhere Jesus went, life seemed to flourish. The earth and all that was in it was replenished. Diseases were healed. Demons cast out. The unclean became clean. He cultivated humanity and restored her to her original vocation so that we, in turn, could cultivate others including creation itself. This has vast practical implications for our lives. Am I seeking to cultivate or exploit those around me? Am I stewarding the resources God has entrusted to me for the good of the world around me or am I using them for my own personal benefit? Am I seeking to care for the world? Make healthy and good choices? Build deep and strong relationships? Am I seeking to

replenish the earth? Jesus summed it up simply when He said, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) If we are to fulfill our divine vocation to be cultivators of creation, we must commit ourselves to a life of service to those around us and the world in the name of Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: John 1:1-3, Psalm 8, 104

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January 4, 2022

Glory

Readings for today: John 1:1-3, Psalm 8, Psalm 104

Father, through Your Holy Spirit, open Your Word to me that I may meet you face to face, hear your voice, learn what you would have me learn, and grow ever deeper in my faith. I pray this in the name of Jesus, amen.

As I read these words, I look out the window of a home high above Grand Lake. It's winter. The snow has been falling the entire time we've been here. Our family is on their annual post-Christmas vacation to the mountains of Colorado. The lake is large and deep. Significant portions have yet to freeze over. The trees are laden with several inches of snow. The ground covered and every morning we can see the tracks of the animals who've passed by in the night. The stars at night have been covered by the clouds but normally they blaze with a brilliance we cannot see from our home in Parker. There's just something about coming up here that brings us closer to God. Closer to our Creator. Gets us in touch with the wonder of all He has made. And it brings new meaning to the words, "what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?" (Psalm 8:4)

When I pause in the silence and solitude of a winter morning with my family still asleep and consider the blessings God has poured into my life, I am in awe. I enjoy the love of a godly woman who's been at my side for almost thirty years. I have deep friendships with my four children, two of whom are now adults and launching out on their own. I am blessed by the relationships I have with my parents, in-laws, siblings and their families. I am financially secure. My body is healthy and strong. My mind is clear. I have the privilege of serving as pastor for an amazing church, alongside spiritual leaders I admire, and work with a group of people I get to call friends. I get to teach aspiring pastors at a local seminary. I get to travel the world to preach the gospel and train church planters to go to places where the name of Jesus has never been heard. I get to serve our denomination in a variety of capacities as we seek God's will for the future of our life together. My life is rich and full. This must be the "glory and honor" the Psalmist is talking about. It's less about titles and achievements and more about relationships and the opportunities God gives us to serve in His Kingdom.

What keeps me from pride? What keeps human beings humble before the Lord? Here again, the Psalmist provides the answer. "I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being. May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the Lord. Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more! Bless the Lord, O my soul! Praise the Lord!" (Psalm 104:33-35) I keep my eyes focused on God. He gives and takes away. Surely I've had my dark moments along the way. Times when I wasn't sure I could pay the bills. Times when my physical health wasn't great. Times when my marriage was on the rocks. Times when my relationships with my children was strained to the point of breaking. Times when my professional career was in shambles. Yes, I've had my share of hard times. But in those moments, I discovered God at His most glorious! When I needed Him most, God was always there! Faithful. Steadfast. True. "In the beginning was the Word…" In our present darkness is the Word. At the end of all things will be the Word. He is the one who was and is and is to come! Place your trust in Him today!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 3-5

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January 5, 2022

Where Art Thou?

Readings for today: Genesis 3-5

Father, through your Holy Spirit, open my eyes and heart that I may receive the gift of your Word today. Grant me wisdom and understanding so that I may know how to walk more fully in the light of the Lord.

Where art thou? What a question from God. It's not like God can't see Adam and Eve crouching in the bushes behind their fig leaves. The Psalmist is clear that there is no place I can hide from God. If I climb to the highest of heavens, God is there. If I plunge into the depths of the earth, God is there. If I rise on the wings of the morning and settle on the far part of the sea, even there God is waiting for me. Nothing is hidden from Him so why this question? What is God after with Adam and Eve? What is God after with me? Where are you, Doug? Where's your head? Where's your heart? I am here waiting for you, Doug. Where are you? Why are you hiding? Why are you running? Why are you avoiding Me? Where are you, Doug? I miss our time together in the silence and solitude of each morning and evening. I miss our time together in worship. Where are you, Doug?

It's a powerful question for reflection. It reminds me that God is ever seeking after me. Relentlessly pursuing me. He will not rest until He tracks me down. My heart is so prone to wander. I am so easily distracted. The cares and the worries of this world cause me a lot of anxiety. My desires can be all over the map. Physically, I am getting older and I can feel my body breaking down. I have more aches and pains than in previous years. The toll I've taken on my body is catching up to me. My shoulders ache. My back hurts. I can't do the things I once was able to do. Mentally, I continue to grow but I too often fill my mind with all sorts of unnecessary things. I do not think on what is noble or true or righteous or good but instead I allow myself to get drawn into the anger and frustration and bitterness that plagues so much of our world. Emotionally, I am learning. As a young boy, I learned to bury my emotions as a coping mechanism and have spent my entire life feeling stunted as a result. I feel deeply but cannot seem to find ways to express it. I have a hard time shedding tears. I do not let myself get too up lest I become disappointed or too down lest I feel weak. I keep a tight rein on my emotions because I am not sure I am safe. Spiritually, I know my sin. It is ever before me. I know my failures before the Lord. I know I do things I ought not to do and don't do things I should do. Where are you, Doug?

One can easily see my natural bent to be self-critical. ;-) But the above certainly does not define me and does not tell the whole story. When answering this question before the Lord, I must also acknowledge the many ways I have grown in my life. Yes, my body is breaking down and yet I enjoy good health. I get a good night's sleep. I exercise regularly. I eat well. I pay attention to how I physically feel. I maintain an active lifestyle. I want to honor God with my body. Mentally, I am sharp. I read the Bible daily. I read books that encourage and equip and help me think more deeply about my faith. I use my intellectual gifts to serve others and to build up the Body of Christ and I know God is pleased. Emotionally, I have come a long way. I am learning to express my feelings to those I love. I am learning to identify the lies I tell myself. I am becoming more comfortable with naming my feelings and talking about them. This, in turn, has helped me become a better listener. A more empathetic and sympathetic person. Someone who is emotionally safe for others. Spiritually, I am more like Christ than ever. God has done a great work in my life. He has drawn near to me as I have drawn near to Him. He has honored every moment spent in prayer and in His Word and in worship. He has literally re-shaped how I view the world. How I understand life. He has re-ordered my desires. These things are just as true for me as the self-critique. In fact, an honest look at my life would say they are more true of me.

For many years, my prayer has been “less of me, Jesus, more of you.” I have longed to decrease so that Christ may increase in my life. The only way that can happen is by intentionally dwelling in God’s presence. By living my life ever before Him, I become who He created me to be. Becoming like Christ has nothing to do with my work, it is a byproduct of being present before God. Perhaps this is why I find God’s question to Adam so heartbreaking. Where are you, Adam? As a father, I know what it’s like to feel distant from one’s children. It’s the worst feeling in the world. To not know where they are physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually. To not feel connected to the one you love most. God must have felt all these feelings and more when He asked the question and His hope was for Adam’s return. Sadly, Adam and Eve chose to blame-shift. They chose to justify themselves. They chose the path of sin. How different things would be if they had torn off those fig leaves, confessed their sin, and humbled themselves before God! How different things would be in my own life if I too would stop trying to hide and vulnerably, authentically, honestly approached my Savior.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 6-7

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January 6, 2022

Favor with God

Readings for today: Genesis 6-7

Father, through your Holy Spirit, illumine my heart to the truths you want me to see today. Open the wonders of the Word to me in such a way that I will be challenged and equipped and more deeply converted to the gospel.

"Noah found grace in the eyes of God." (Gen. 6:8)

"Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation, and Noah walked with God." (Gen. 6:9)

"And Noah did unto all that the Lord commanded him." (Gen. 7:5)

"By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith." (Heb. 11:7)

I want to be like Noah. I want to be a person of faith. A person who is willing to forsake the ways of the world and cling to God. A person who is able to see beyond the horizons of this life to the life to come. A person who is able to pierce the veil of this earthly existence and peer into the heavenly realm. In past years, I've been struck by the evil of humanity described in this passage or the grief of God that caused Him to "repent" (!!!) that He had ever made humanity in the first place. I've wrestled over the identity of the Nephilim or tried to wrap my head around the "sons of God" having sexual relations with the "daughters of man." Is this an early description of the crossbreeding that took place between Homo Sapiens and Neanderthals? Does it refer to the angelic beings who were cast out of heaven now taking human women as wives and bearing half-demonic offspring? Lots of questions to ponder for sure but this year I found myself drawn again to Noah. A man who found grace or favor in the eyes of God. A righteous man. A blameless man. A man who walked with God. A man who obeyed all God commanded him. And I want to be more like him.

How does one become such a person? By faith. Noah believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. The writer of Hebrews teaches us that it is impossible to please God without faith for whoever would draw near to God must believe He exists and rewards those who seek Him. (Heb. 11:6) Noah trusted God at a time when faith was in short supply. He believed God in a time when not much was known about Him. God had not yet revealed Himself on Mt. Sinai. God had not yet shared with humanity His divine name. God had not yet given the Ten Commandments. God had not yet made His covenant with Abraham. It's hard for me to fathom how Noah knew God much less walked with God. Did he hear the stories of his great-grandfather Enoch? One of the very few other people in the Bible who "walked with God?" Did he hear his grandfather tell of the day when Enoch was "taken?" Did his family talk about Enoch's character and manner of life? Did Noah make it his goal emulate him? Clearly, Noah must have known something about God. Must have believed he at least existed. Must have had a heart to seek God. And we know from Jeremiah 29:13 that "if we seek God, we shall find Him, provided we seek Him with all of our hearts." Perhaps this seeking of God was enough for Noah to be declared righteous and blameless in his generation.

What we do know is once God chose Noah, Noah obeyed Him completely. He built the ark. Gathered the animals. Prepared for the long days and nights ahead when the floods would come and everything

he knew would be destroyed. Noah must have endured ridicule and scorn from his neighbors. The writer of Hebrews suggests Noah's act of obedience was a deliberate move to condemn the ways of the world. A rejection of the wickedness of the people who surrounded him. I cannot imagine what it must have been like to watch the world drown in judgment. To close your doors to your neighbors and friends. To shut out your community as the rains came and the floodwaters rose. But that's exactly what Noah did. He separated himself from the evil of those he lived among and escaped the wrath and judgment of God when it came upon the earth.

What does it mean for me to find favor with God? What does it mean for me to be righteous and blameless and walk with God? What does it look like for me to obey all God has commanded me? I have the benefit of living on the far side of the resurrection. God is not some shadowy, largely unknown being. He has revealed Himself completely and fully in the Person of Jesus Christ so faith for me is trusting in the life, death, and resurrection of my Lord. Righteousness and blamelessness come from walking with Jesus through all the ups and downs of life. Obeying God means obeying all Jesus has commanded His disciples in the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. It means seeking Jesus with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. Loving Him above all over loves. Serving Him above all else. Placing my entire life into His hands. By committing myself to Christ, I condemn the world with all it's evil and wickedness and I become an heir to righteousness through adoption into God's own family.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 8-9, Psalm 12

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January 7, 2022

Re-Creation

Readings for today: Genesis 8-9, Psalm 12

Father, through Your Holy Spirit, reveal Yourself to me in the reading of Your Word. Show me Your heart. Show me Your character. Show me Your face that I may know you more.

It's striking to me how similar the language of Genesis 9 is to the language of Genesis 1 and yet it's not exactly the same. I find myself pondering why that might be this morning. Take a moment and reflect on these passages again…

"And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day." (Genesis 1:27-31)

"And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it." (Genesis 9:1-7)

I imagine what I am seeing is the impact of the Fall. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever but His creation has suffered a mortal blow. The creature He made in His image – humanity – refuses to submit to His will, rejects the relationship God offers, and goes her own way. The results speak for themselves - "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth…" (Genesis 8:21) How does this evil manifest itself? Violence. Fear. Dread. These things were not present initially when God entrusted creation into our hands. In the beginning, humanity lived in harmony with all God had made. Yes, they were called to "subdue the earth" and "have dominion" but one doesn't get the sense that it was coercive or forced. God renews His call to Noah after the flood but the differences are stark. The creation mandate remains – "Be fruitful, multiply, and replenish the earth" but then the reality of the brokenness of sin settles in. Noah and his family will subdue the earth and exercise dominion but it will be through fear and dread. The animals of the earth, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea will all run from them. They will resist even as they are given into their hands. The reality of violence is acknowledged as is the first mention of the principle of lex talionis or proportional justice. God seeking to restrain the violent impulses that drove humanity pre-flood into chaos. The flood was an act of re-creation. God turning loose the waters that existed at the beginning of time to reshape all He had originally made. The Garden is gone. Paradise is lost. The world is now a hostile, violent, dangerous place full of fear and dread. Noah and his family will have to fight to survive.

So little has changed in the thousands of years since Noah first stepped off the ark. The world is still full of violence and fear and dread. It is full of hate and rage and greed. Humanity has made incredible progress technologically but has remained morally deficient. Human history provides plenty of empirical evidence for the doctrine of original sin and total depravity. Shoot, my own life provides the same! We just don't want to submit. We refuse to humble ourselves before God. We will not relinquish our selfish hold on this world. Thankfully, God has not left us in our broken condition. He will not leave us in our fallen estate. I love how the Apostle Paul puts it in Ephesians 2, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility…and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility." (Ephesians 2:13-14, 16) Jesus Christ left His home in heaven to come to the "far country" of this world to reclaim those who were lost. His desire was to draw us close. Draw us into His loving embrace. He is so faithful, He will pursue every human being. He will chase down every lost soul. He will leave no one behind. How did humanity respond? The way we always do. We rejected Christ. We killed the Lord of glory rather than submit to His embrace. Jesus became a victim of violence. A victim of humanity's fear and dread. A victim of humanity's hostility to the will of God. And yet through His death, God brought an end to sin. He broke the power of death. He set us free from bondage to evil. He made a way back to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 10-11

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January 8, 2022

A Mighty Man

Readings for today: Genesis 10-11

Father, your Word brings life. Life to my spirit. Life to my mind. Life to my heart. Life to my body. It reminds of my purpose which is to worship You and serve You and enjoy You forever. Through your Spirit share with me more deeply how to become the man You created me to be.

Nimrod. A mighty hunter before the Lord. A legendary king. A powerful tribal warlord. The "first on earth to be a mighty man." The man who founded Babel. Is he the architect of the tower? Is he the one who puts the plans together to build a ziggurat to the heavens? Does he convince the people they don't need God? To build a monument to themselves? Is he one of the primary reasons they disobey the command to "be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth?" It wouldn't surprise me. Even a cursory glance at human history reveals our tendency to fall for the strong man. The mighty man. The egotistical man. The narcissistic man. Who is lauded in our history books? Who is extolled for their leadership? I remember several years ago coming across a best-selling business book titled, "Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun" and thinking to myself, "surely, this isn't serious?" Attila the Hun? One of the most brutal and terrifying kings in human history? This is the guy we're supposed to emulate? And lest you think we've progressed beyond this myth in our modern era, consider how leaders like Vladimir Putin or Xi Jinping or some of our own political leaders carry themselves? Consider how much we idolize celebrity or social influencers? Heck, even the church has bought into this leadership cult! I can't tell you how many churches today are built around the narcissistic personality of the senior pastor and how many of them will fall by the wayside when such leaders inevitably fall. It's brutal. I speak from personal experience. A significant part of my own ministry has been to go in and help clean up the mess these leaders leave behind. (Consider downloading The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill podcast to learn about a recent example of one such leader's fall from grace.)

So let's assume Nimrod did lead the people to build the Tower of Babel. Let's assume he used his power to bring order and security to their lives. Let's assume he leveraged their common language and tribal connections to keep them together. Nimrod must have been a persuasive speaker. A charismatic leader. A man who could cast a vision. Tragically, his vision was not God's vision. Instead of sending the people out to explore and fill the earth, he encourages them to stay together. Instead of caring and cultivating the earth so it would be fruitful, he leads them to the fertile plain of Shinar where they can settle down. Build a great city. Construct a mighty tower that would reach to the heavens. It makes perfect sense. It would be a symbol of safety and security. It would provide protection from the elements and the dangers of the world. It would give them a sense of place. A sense of connection. A sense of community. No matter how far they might wander from the city they had built, they could keep the tower in view and always find their way back home.

Frankly this doesn't sound all that bad until you take a step back and realize they were doing all these things without God! "And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men had built. And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they all have one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them." (Gen. 11:5-6) This is the Garden of Eden all over again. Humanity wanting to be like God. Humanity choosing independence from God. Humanity rebelling against God's explicit command. Thankfully, God refuses to let humanity persist in her sin. Just as He expelled Adam and Eve before they could eat of the Tree of Life and be trapped forever in their broken estate, He now confuses the

languages of the people and scatters them over the face of the earth lest they become forever ensnared by their innate selfishness and narcissism.

What about me? If I'm honest, I know I am no different than Nimrod. Given the right set of circumstances, I am confident I would fall for the same temptations. I have narcissistic tendencies. I can be as selfish and greedy and proud as the next person. My heart is an idol factory. My nature is ever inclined towards sin. My thoughts and attitudes and actions reflect the deep brokenness of my condition. I am not immune. So where have I gone astray? Where do I lead my family or my congregation astray? Where have I gone against the express will of God in my own life? What towers am I trying to build? Am I seeking to become an influencer? Build an online platform? Measure my success by the size of the church I serve? Am I operating out of a desire for safety and security? Am I seeking to build my home and my life and my community through my own effort apart from God? Or am I seeking God? Am I walking with open hands before Him? Am I following in His footsteps?

Readings for tomorrow: None

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January 10, 2022

God's Call

Readings for today: Genesis 12-13

Father, everything I need to know about a life of faith and my salvation is revealed in Your Word. It is sufficient for all my spiritual needs. Through your Holy Spirit, direct me to what You would have me see and have me learn today.

I remember my last year at Princeton. All of my friends had passed their ordination exams. All of them were interviewing with different churches. All of us were praying for each other and talking about where the Lord might be leading us. Some felt drawn to particular places. Beaches. Mountains. Places they had always dreamed of living in. Some wanted to be close to home. Close to family. Close to those they loved. I too wanted these things if I am honest. At the same time, my wife and I felt very drawn to Genesis 12:1 - "Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee…" As we read these words (not in the King James, mind you!), we realized God was calling us to walk with open hands and an open heart before Him. To let Him guide and direct our steps. To go wherever He might call. To place no limits on Him. So we looked at churches all over the United States. We sent resumes out to about thirty of them. We interviewed with three of them and had a fourth interview scheduled before God showed us the place He wanted us to go. A wonderful church called Overlook Presbyterian Church in the southern port city of Mobile, AL.

We spent six great years there. We were embraced by the community. We built special friendships with the people in our congregation. They taught me almost everything I know about how to pastor well. I can still see them in my mind's eye and my heart warms at the thought of them. I would mention their names but there really are too many to count and all of them had a deep impact on my life and my family. Then God's call came to us again towards the beginning of 2008. It was just after we bought our first home. Just after we settled in for the long haul or so we thought at the time. We moved north to a little town called Sun Prairie outside of Madison, WI to plant a church. We spent two terrible years there. The worst years of our lives. It almost cost us our marriage. Almost cost us our family. I was broken in more ways than I could imagine. Some asked us if we had misheard God. Not at all. The Lord gives and takes away and He met us in the midst of that traumatic experience. He put some wonderful friends in our lives who ministered to us in ways I cannot even begin to describe. They loved us. Listened to us. Prayed with and for us. They were a sanctuary. A refuge. And it is largely because of them that we are still together and still in ministry today. Thankfully, God's call came again at the end of 2009. We moved west. Back home to a little town near where both Kristi and I grew up called Parker, CO to pastor a great church called PEPC. We've had twelve amazing years here. We've been embraced by our church family. Put down deep roots in our community. Shared life with some incredible friends. Raised our kids. Watched God work miracles. The Lord has used PEPC to heal us. Encourage us. Strengthen us. Challenge us. We've grown in more ways than we could ever have imagined and we are thankful for God's abiding presence every step of the way.

As I look back over my journey, I realize there is no way I could have planned it. There were so many twists and turns that only God could orchestrate. Some good. Some bad. Some ugly. Through it all, God was faithful to His promise to use all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose and I imagine Abram must have felt the same way. When he looked back on his journey from Ur to Haran with his father. From Haran to Canaan with his nephew. From Bethel to the Negev to Egypt and back again with Sarai before finally settling in Hebron. Abram had quite a journey. Especially at a time when it was dangerous, perhaps even foolish, to leave the safety and

security of your home, family, clan, and tribe. Abram left it all to follow God's will for his life. He left his business. Left his personal and professional network. Left his friendships. Left all that was familiar to go to the place God would show him. This is what stepping out in faith looked like for Abram…what does it look like for you? Where is God calling you to go? What is God calling you to leave behind? Are you willing to walk with open hands and an open heart before Him? Truly letting His Spirit guide and direct your steps?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 14-16

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January 11, 2022

Hagar

Readings for today: Genesis 14-16

Father, through your Holy Spirit, open to me the wonders of Your Word. Teach me all that pertains to life and godliness that I may know You more deeply and experience You more intimately and serve You more faithfully.

Hagar has always fascinated me. She probably was given to Abram while he was in Egypt. Perhaps as an exchange for Sarai when Pharaoh took her into his household. Maybe she was part of Sarai's retinue when she left Pharaoh's household. We're not given the details. She would have been a young girl at the time. No rights. No voice. No status. She was a slave. The only reason we know her name at all is because of the role she is forced to play God's salvation plan. She has no choice in the matter. When her mistress decides to take matters into her own hands and produce the promised heir through human means, Hagar is pressed into service. She is of child-bearing age presumably. She's clearly demonstrated some measure of fertility already which is why Sarai would have chosen her and not another. Perhaps she even has other children? Again, we are not given to know. We only know she is given to Abram to be his concubine. A surrogate for Sarai who is barren.

Barrenness was a curse in the ancient world. Women were valued almost exclusively by the number of heirs they could produce. The more children, the more honored. The less children, the less honored. No children? Shamed. Sarai lived with shame almost all her life. Though loved by her husband, she could not give him what he desired most. She was old now. Long past child-bearing years so the promise of God to their family must have felt like a cruel joke. Especially when it didn't immediately come to pass. But Sarai wanted Abram to receive his reward so she does what any Ancient Near East matriarch who was barren would have done. She gives him her servant in her place. The goal being once the servant became pregnant and bore a child, they would be adopted as Abram and Sarai's own. Predictably, when Hagar does get pregnant, her relationship with Sarai changes. Now she has power. She can give her master something her mistress cannot. Becoming pregnant elevates her status in the household. She's almost on the same level now as her mistress and Sarai responds accordingly to re-establish her authority. She abuses Hagar and Hagar flees.

Hagar's prospects would have been dim at best. Alone. Pregnant. A runaway slave. No money. No family. Nowhere to go. Egypt must have felt like it was on the other side of the world. But God sees her. God looks after her. He finds her by the spring on the way to Shur. And he makes this incredible promise to her. One that echoes the promise He made to Abram. Her offspring will also become a multitude. One that cannot be numbered. This is simply unprecedented in the Ancient Near East. God treating Hagar as an equal to Abram. It's amazing and it reminds us yet again of what the Apostle Paul will later say, "God shows no partiality." (Romans 2:11) Jew or Gentile. Israelite or Egyptian. Master or slave. Rich or poor. Head of the household or servant of the household. Man or woman. It doesn't matter to God. He sees us. He knows us. He loves us. He looks after us. Just like He did Hagar. Just like He did Abram and Sarai. Is it messy at times? Yes. Is it confusing? Sure. Does it sometimes involve suffering? More often than we know. We are sinners after all. Our families are all dysfunctional on some level. Life in this world is never up and to the right. Hagar had to return and submit to Sarai in order to receive the promise. It wouldn't be the last time she and Sarai would get tangled up. But God worked through the dysfunction of their relationship to bring about His perfect will. What about your life? Where has God met you? Seen you? Looked after you? Where have you experienced His provision and grace?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 17-19

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January 12, 2022

Relationship with God

Readings for today: Genesis 17-19

Father, through Your Spirit, reveal more of Yourself to me as you did to Abraham. Deepen our friendship. Strengthen our bond. Grow the intimacy between us that I may learn to hear Your voice more clearly and discern Your will more completely in my life.

What does it mean to have a relationship with God? Over the years I've heard many describe Christianity as a "relationship" not a "religion", but do we really understand what that means? Are we prepared for all the implications? Are we ready to embrace the demands? Do we appreciate the incredible privilege and honor it is to be called a "friend of God?"

James 2:23 says, "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness and he was called a friend of God." This is an astonishing truth. Out of all the people on earth, God chose Abraham as His friend. God appeared to Abraham. Spoke to Abraham. Made promises to Abraham. Cut a covenant with Abraham. Revealed the depths of His sovereign will to Abraham. When we talk about friendship with God, this is what it looks like. It looks like Abraham talking with God. Walking with God. In the everyday. In the ordinary. Over the course of a lifetime. Notice where God meets Abraham in our text for today. Abraham is 99 years old. Sarah, his wife, is 89 years old. Presumably they've been walking with God for many, many years. They've taken incredible steps of faith. Leaving their ancestral home of Ur. Leaving their adopted home in Haran. Embracing a nomadic lifestyle. Trusting God to lead and guide them every step of the way. Though they have no son, they've clung to the promise God first made them in Haran that they would become a great nation. The father and mother of a multitude of people. Though they have no homeland, they've clung to the promise God made them to give them the land of Canaan. Though they've done nothing to earn God's favor, they've clung to the promise God made them of an eternal covenant between Himself and their family for all generations. And because they believe God, He calls them friends.

Friendship with God brings with it all sorts of privileges and responsibilities. Abraham has been blessed. He's been protected. He's prospered. His household has grown. He has power and influence in the region. He is the peer of kings. But he also has responsibilities. He must live a particular way. He must never take pride in his wealth. It is the Lord's. He must keep God's covenant and teach his children to do the same. He must circumcise all the males in his household as a sign of obedience. He must become a priest of sorts for the human race, interceding on their behalf like he does for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Essentially, Abraham is to be the new Adam. A man who walks with God, cares for creation, and exercises dominion over all God has given him. This is how God will fulfill His original promise to bless the nations of the earth through Abraham and his descendants.

Now fast forward a few thousand years. I am a child of God. Justified by the Jesus' death and resurrection. Regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Adopted as God's own son. God has made me part of a new covenant He established for all who believe. I've been marked by baptism. I feast at His Table. I am now God's friend. What privileges and responsibilities do I bear? Like Abraham, I've been blessed. I've been protected. I've prospered. My household has grown. My circle of friendships is wide and global. I've been given power and influence. But I also have responsibilities. I must submit every area of my life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. I must never take pride in my wealth or power or position. I must keep God's commands and teach my children to do the same. I must embrace humility and grace and forgiveness as a way of life. I must become a priest of sorts, interceding for my family, my church,

my community, my country, and the world. I must walk with God, care for creation, and exercise dominion over all God has given me in a way that brings life and love and joy and peace to those around me. This is how God will fulfill His promise to bless the nations through me…a spiritual descendant of Abraham. What about you?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 20-23

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January 13, 2022

God Will Provide

Readings for today: Genesis 20–23

Father, there is always value in spending time in Your Word. You honor every precious moment. You speak through every single verse. There is a message for me each and every day. May I slow down long enough to listen to Your still, small voice as you speak to me today.

"God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." I have long wrestled with this verse. It has been an enigma to me. How could one walk with such faith? Did Abraham really believe what he was saying or was this wishful thinking? Is he just trying to buy time while he figures out another way? Is he just telling Isaac what he wants to hear because he cannot bring himself to tell him the truth? Did Abraham ever doubt his course of action? Did he ever wonder if he misheard God? What kind of man would even consider sacrificing his own son? Why would I ever consider such a person someone to emulate? Perhaps you've wrestled with some of these questions as well?

Recently, I've come to see this verse as the ultimate expression of Abraham's faith. Abraham has this ability to take life as it comes. He walks with open hands before the Lord. He doesn't cling to outcomes or conclusions or destinations. He began his journey with God without knowing where it would take him. He believed the promise of God for a son even though he had no idea of the timing. And here he is willing to offer his son as a burnt offering on a mountain God has yet to show him. He has no idea how this is all going to end. None of it made any sense. I'm sure it created all kinds of questions in his mind. But still he believes. He trusts God. He knows a promise has been made. A covenant has been established. God has committed Himself to Abraham and his descendants so somehow, someway this will all work out. The promise will not fail. Isaac cannot die on this mountain. Abraham walks by faith not by sight. He doesn't have to solve this problem. He doesn't have to come up with "plan B" in case God doesn't come through. He lets go of his need to control the outcome. He lets go of his need to understand the mysteries of God. He lets go of his need to know the end of the story.

I am learning this same lesson in my life. The uncertainties of this last season have really caused me to slow down. To take each day as it comes. To not plan too far ahead. To let go of the need to figure things out. It's actually okay to not know all God is up to. It's actually okay to not understand all His ways. It's actually okay to not know how all the things I've got going right now in my life will end. This is super challenging to me. It cuts against the grain of my natural way of doing things. I have always been the "man with the plan." In fact, I don't just have "plan B" but plans "C, D, E…all the way to Z!" I hate uncertainty. I get incredibly anxious when I am confused. I don't like feeling out of control. So you can imagine how COVID has exacerbated these things to the nth degree!

I'm learning to walk with open hands like Abraham. To trust that God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering. When the pandemic began, all my plans got thrown out the window. How in the world does one "pastor" remotely? How would our church respond to the crisis? How do I navigate the layers of conflict around public health policy, political hyper-partisanship, and ethnic tensions? How do I help people process the trauma and grief of the past two years? How can I cast a vision for the future of our ministry when I don't even know what tomorrow may bring? How can I love my own family in the midst of our disagreements and divisions? I've wrestled with all these questions and more and what I've discovered is I don't have to have all the answers. The more I slow down. The more I listen. The more I let go. The more I create space for God to step in and provide. And you know what? He has never once failed to show up! I've seen more miracles in the past year in my life and in my church

family than I can count and it is all because God has proved faithful to provide the “lamb” for every single “burnt offering.”

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 24-26

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January 14, 2022

God's Sovereignty

Readings for today: Genesis 24-26

One of the things I struggled with the most when I first started reading the Bible was reconciling how God could use such sinful, broken people to accomplish His plan. Why does God seem to overlook Abraham's lying? Why does God turn Lot's wife into a pillar of salt for a backwards glance and yet seemingly does nothing to Lot's daughters when they rape their father to get pregnant? How could God allow Hagar and Ishmael to be treated so terribly by Sarah? And what are we to make of the conflict between Esau and Jacob which began before they were even born? These events seem to call God's character into question.

And yet, when I take a step back to reflect on my own life, I realize God's still using sinful, broken people to accomplish His plan! I remember talking to a high school friend several years ago. We hadn't seen each other since graduation. As we got caught up, she asked me what I did for a living. "I'm a pastor." The stunned look on her face said it all. She and I were close in high school. She knew I was a drunk. She knew I was vulgar. She knew I was a liar. She knew I was arrogant and mean. Of all the careers she could have imagined me having back then, pastor wouldn't have even made the list! Sure, you say, that was thirty years ago. A lot's changed, right? You might be surprised. Yes, when Christ ambushed me at the University of Colorado in Boulder, my life was radically changed. But that doesn't mean I became any less a sinner. Yes, the Holy Spirit entered my heart that day and began the process of sanctification but I am constantly amazed at how deep my sinful tendencies run. Yes, I have grown in so many ways and have become far more disciplined and self-controlled but my internal thoughts and feelings still reflect much of the corruption of the Fall. Does my failure to live up to my calling in Christ Jesus call God's character into question?

I don't think so. In fact, I think God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He simply is doing in my life what He first did in Abraham's life. He is sovereignly directing all things to serve the purpose of His will. His plan cannot be delayed. Cannot be detoured. Cannot be denied. God has chosen from the beginning to work His will through the creature made in His own image. God has chosen from the beginning to use sinful, broken creatures to bring about His will on earth as it is in heaven. God has chosen from the beginning to deposit the treasure of the gospel in weak and insecure and unfaithful people. That's why the Apostle Paul will later call us "jars of clay." Fragile. Chipped. Cracked pots through which God reveals His glory. It's the most amazing thing.

So back to the passage we read for today. When we read the text with the eyes of faith, we can see God at work. We see the guidance of God as He leads the servant of Abraham miraculously to Rebekah. (Reminds me of that great line from Casablanca where Bogart says, "Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine.") We see the hand of God present as Abraham settles his estate and dies peacefully among his people. His funeral, attended by his two boys, Ishmael and Isaac, must have been a tender scene. We see both Ishmael and Isaac receive the blessing of God as their families grow. We see God heal Rebekah's barren womb in what will become a pattern throughout the Old Testament. We witness the sovereign choice of God to elect Jacob to carry on the promise even though Esau is the firstborn. We see Esau confirm that decision as he despises his birthright, selling it to Jacob for a bowl of stew. Finally, we see God renew His covenant with Isaac only to have him break faith just like his father had done. Time and time again we are reminded that unless God acts to preserve His promise, we are doomed. The human race is just too dysfunctional. Too prone to evil. To

easily seduced by sin. This should challenge us as well as comfort us. So where is God challenging you today to follow His will? How is God comforting you in those areas where you fall short?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 27-29

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January 15, 2022

Bargaining with God

Readings for today: Genesis 27-29

Father, open my eyes to the wonders of Your Word this morning so that I might hear Your voice and learn the truths You would teach me.

Jacob is such a contrast to his grandfather. Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. Jacob disbelieved God and would need to learn some hard lessons as a result. In both cases, God appears to them. In both cases, God makes promises to them. Yes, these promises must have seemed impossible at the time they were made. A promised child to a barren woman. Descendants outnumbering the sand on the seashore. Land for as far as the eyes could see. Prosperity. Abundance. Provision. Protection. The only difference is that Abraham received these promises by faith. He never doubted God would deliver. In fact, the Apostle Paul says, "No unbelief made Abraham waver concerns the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith and gave glory to God, fully convinced God was able to do what he had promised." (Romans 4:20-21)

Jacob, on the other hand, seeks to bargain with God. Listen to what he says in Genesis 28:20-22 again, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you." It's almost humorous to read in retrospect. Does Jacob really believe he has a choice? God has just appeared miraculously to him in a dream and told him He would be with him. God told him He would keep him safe wherever he would go. God told him He would bring him back to the land. God told him He would not leave Jacob until He had accomplished all He had promised. Jacob takes what begins as an unconditional covenant of faithfulness from God and tries to turn into a conditional human contract with an "out" clause.

How many times have I done the same? How many times have I tried to bargain with God? How many times have I placed all sorts of conditions on His love and grace? To be honest, I am much more like Jacob than I am like Abraham. At the same time, I've been following Jesus for close to thirty years now and I find myself growing in trust. Growing in faith. Growing in my confidence that God can and will do what He has promised. I've seen miracles. I've seen God come through when I was sure all was lost. I've heard testimony after testimony of God's faithful provision in some of the most desperate of circumstances. It's one of the reasons I try to journal. I want to make sure to keep a record of where God has fulfilled His promises to me. As I read back over all the answered prayers, my heart is encouraged. My eyes are lifted up. Hope floods my soul and I find myself renewed yet again. Where has God been faithful to you? Where has God met you over the last two years during COVID? How have you experienced His abiding faithfulness and abundant provision in your life?

Readings for tomorrow: None

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January 17, 2022

Self-Righteousness

Readings for today: Genesis 30-33

All of us are righteous in our own eyes. All of us have a great capacity to justify our thoughts, decisions, feelings, and actions. It's been said that "humanity's ability to sin is only exceeded by her ability to rationalize away her sin." I believe that with all my heart because I know my heart. I know how easy it is for me to blame-shift. I know how easy it is for me to shirk responsibility. I know how easy it is for me to justify my anger, frustration, hatred, bitterness, etc.

Many years ago, my life was at a breaking point. My job was not going well. I could feel the walls closing in. Every conversation with those I reported to seemed to end in conflict. I felt helpless. I was discouraged. It took a huge effort just to get out of bed each day. Rather than own my responsibility for the condition I found myself in, I blamed others. I retreated emotionally and relationally from those I loved. I neglected my wife and children. I spent hours distracting myself. All to no avail. This went on for months. My wife grew more and more distant and angry and upset. My children bore the brunt of my frustration. And I justified every bit of it because I was hurt. I was misunderstood. I was being let down. Finally my wife sat me down for the hardest conversation we've ever had in our marriage. "I never thought I'd ever say this but I don't like being married to you. You need to decide between me and your job. You have 24 hours." Her words broke me. That night I wrestled with God. I yelled at Him. Shook my fists. Blamed Him for everything that had gone wrong. For hours I paced the floor, pouring out all my fears and frustrations at Him. He simply listened and waited. Eventually I exhausted myself and said, "God, I need your help. I've made a mess of my life. I've got nothing left. And I'm afraid I'm going to lose everything I hold dear." God replied, "I know. I'm sitting in the middle of the mess with you. I've never left your side. I know you are afraid. I know you've failed. I know you've hurt those you love the most. But I can restore all things if you will simply hand your life over to me." Thankfully, I did. It's taken years but God has not only restored my marriage and my family and my career but He has given me so much more.

I think about my story every time I read the story of Jacob. Jacob was a master manipulator. A schemer to the core. He justified all sorts of sin in his life. He stole from his brother. He lied to his father. He was a poor husband and father. He took advantage of his uncle. He even tried to cut deals with God. All in an effort to avoid responsibility. Avoid accountability. Avoid facing the music. Eventually things caught up to him. He was traveling back to the land of his father when he heard his brother was on the way to meet him. He had four hundred men with him. Jacob assumed a reckoning was coming so he did what he always did. He tried to buy his way out of it. He sent his brother gifts. Attempts at flattery. None of it worked. Finally, Jacob had no choice but send his family over the river. Now he was all alone. The walls were finally closing in. He had nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. God had him right where He wanted him. All night long, Jacob wrestled with God. We do not know what went through Jacob's mind but if his experience was anything like my own, I am sure God confronted him all of his past sin and it broke him. Literally. Physically. He would walk with a limp for the rest of his life. But he was now free.

What about you? Where do you find yourself justifying your sin? Justifying your hurt? Justifying your feelings? Justifying your behavior? Where do you find yourself making excuses? Blaming others? Avoiding responsibility? Self-righteousness is the most deadly of sins. Turn to the Lord. Wrestle with Him. Let Him break you so that He might restore all you have lost.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 34-37

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January 18, 2022

The Sin of Revenge

Readings for today: Genesis 34-37

Father, the stories of the Old Testament seem so foreign to me. I struggle as I read about the choices Your people make. Then I think about my own choices and I realize I am no different. Teach me even through all the brokenness how to follow You.

The choices the children of Jacob make are deeply unsettling. Massacring an entire city? Selling their brother into slavery? It's hard for me to connect to what's going on or how any of this could be even remotely be connected to God. It's hard for me to understand why God even puts up with them. Why He continues to reach out to Jacob and remain faithful to His promises? In my humanness, I think there must be a limit. There must be a point at which God will say, "No more!" That's enough. You've gone too far. The fact that God continues to associate and even protect such a broken, dysfunctional family creates all sorts of questions for me. Questions about God's character and nature. Questions about His purpose and intent. Questions about God's wisdom. These can be scary questions on some level for me because I was taught never to question God. Furthermore, I was raised in a home where you never questioned authority. So the fact that these questions even pop into my mind can raise all kinds of fears. Thankfully, I learned years ago that God's not scared of my questions. God's a big boy and can handle anything I might throw at Him. All one has to do is look throughout the Scriptures and see how God invites His people to bring all of their hopes and fears, doubts and uncertainties, confusion and struggles to Him. The Psalms are filled with all kinds of questions. The Book of Job must not be forgotten with it's honest, searching, probing questions of God's justice and righteousness and goodness. This is what I love about the Christian faith. This is what I love about my relationship with God. But still I wrestle through these passages every year.

One thing I have learned is to appreciate the cultural distance between the Ancient Near East in which Jacob and his family lived and the 21st century, Western culture in which I live. In those days, a family's honor was everything. It was worth more than all their wealth or influence or power. In fact, it was the source of all those things. When Dinah is raped by Shechem, it's important to note the language that is used to describe the act. Humiliation. Defilement. It's not just a violent act done to someone they loved but a shameful act against their entire family. The shame is compounded by Shechem's request to marry Dinah. And lest one have any sympathy at all for Shechem's family, their true intentions are revealed when they discuss the economic impact of intermarriage. It's clear their end goal is to eliminate Jacob and his clan altogether. This creates a blood feud between the two people groups and blood feuds in the Middle East – even to this day – are brutal. Jacob's sons massacre the males in the city thus eliminating any potential future threat or retaliation. They carry off all the wealth of the city, including the women and children and assimilate them into their own clan. It's as if Shechem and his family never existed. Jacob knows their actions could potentially create ripple effects that would spread throughout the region. It's possible clan members have intermarried into other tribes or other people groups and would feel compelled to respond. But Jacob's sons are unrepentant. The honor of their family and clan must come first.

So how does such a story relate to me? In 21st century America? Well, if I am honest, the one thing that does resonate in this story is the impulse to retaliate. To seek revenge. To get back at those who hurt me. I don't like feeling weak. I don't like feeling shamed. I don't like feeling wounded. So when these things happen to me, my first response is almost always to think of ways I can get back at the other person. Repay them for all the pain they have caused me. I scheme of ways I could respond. I have all

sorts of dreams/fantasies of what I could say or do that would balance the scales. Make things even. Sure, I would never massacre an entire city but I have lost control of my anger at times and lashed out. When attacked personally or professionally, I have found myself responding in kind. Using the gifts I have and the resources I've been given and the power I hold to defend my honor and that of my family or those I love. Far too often, I have refused to turn the other cheek. The results are always the same. Violence begets violence. Pain begets more pain. Hurt people simply go on hurting people. What's the answer? Forgiveness. Reconciliation. Letting go of my need to defend myself and instead laying down my pride and ego for the sake of the relationship. Some see this as weakness. What I've found is that it is the ultimate sign of strength. Only the truly strong can relinquish their need for vengeance. Only the truly strong can let go of their need to get back. Only the truly strong don't need to defend themselves or their honor. Only the truly strong can put the welfare of others – including their enemies – above their own.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 38-40

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January 19, 2022

Unlikely People

Readings for today: Genesis 38-40

Father, Your Word is living and active. It is sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates to the deepest places of my being. May Your Word take root, Father, and bear fruit for Your glory.

God works in the most unlikely of places. God uses the most unlikely of people. Tamar is a great example. She's an outsider. It's highly likely she was a Canaanite which means she's not part of God's chosen people. She most likely knows little to nothing about God. She is chosen by Judah to marry his firstborn son. Er is a wicked man. We aren't told why. Perhaps he was abusive. Perhaps he was neglectful. Perhaps he was violent or hateful. Perhaps he despised the God of his fathers. Whatever his crime, it was worthy of death. She is then passed down to Onan. Not an uncommon practice in the Ancient Near East. The goal being the preservation of a bloodline. Onan rebels. His sin is not just sexual in nature. It actually shames the entire family. It disrupts the economic, social, and familial structure of Judah's family. God judges him harshly and he too dies. Who knows how Tamar must have felt at this point? Did she feel like damaged goods? Did she feel used and abused? Did she feel cursed? Time drags on. Judah is clearly unwilling to take another chance on her. She is in danger of not only remaining widowed but childless which was a fate worse than death back then. So she does the most remarkable thing. She makes a plan. She waits for the opportune time. Her plan is risky but it's all she's got. Knowing Judah is lonely, she dresses as a sacred Canaanite prostitute – a common vocation in those days – and waits for him to come by. He hires her. Sleeps with her. She conceives and the rest is history. Really important history. Her son Perez will become the ancestor of kings like David and Solomon and eventually Jesus Himself.

Recently, I was talking to a high school friend of mine. She and I haven't seen each other since graduation. Back then I was not a Christian. I was sarcastic, arrogant, and often mean. I was a drunk, a college drop-out, and a fool. My life was going nowhere. When she found out I was a pastor, she was shocked. I'm not surprised. So are most people who knew me before I met Christ. You see, God met me in the most unlikely of places on the campus of the University of Colorado in Boulder. I still remember the exact spot where God ambushed me and changed my life. There was nothing redemptive about my life at the time. Nothing good. Certainly nothing godly. Of all the people God could have chosen, I had to be among the most unlikely of candidates. Certainly among the most unworthy. And yet God specializes in using the foolish things of this world to confound the wise. God used Tamar to confound Judah and perpetuate the eventual line of David. God is using Doug Resler to confound those who believe some are just too far gone to save and bring the message of the gospel to the ends of the earth. It's amazing.

What about you? Perhaps you feel a lot like Tamar? You've been abused. You've been mistreated or marginalized. Perhaps you feel like an outsider or an outcast. Maybe you even feel cursed. Maybe you resonate with my story? You've been the abuser. You've been proud and arrogant. You've enjoyed privilege and power but you've squandered it all and now your life is going nowhere fast. God is still at work, friends! In the most unlikely of people. In the most unlikely of places. At a time when you least expect it. That's when God shows up. Don't lose faith. Don't lose hope. Don't lose heart.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 41-43

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January 20, 2022

God's Plan

Readings for today: Genesis 41-43

Father, You work all things for the good of those who love You and are called according to Your purpose. Help me to hold fast to this truth even when times are tough or I feel unfairly treated or unjustly accused. Help me to remember You are at work and will complete the good work You've begun in me.

Years ago, the Lord spoke three words to me in a time of prayer. It's one of the few times in my life where I have heard His voice audibly in my mind. I can still remember it as if it were yesterday. These three words were to guide my life from that point forward. They were to become the grid through which I would discern and process every opportunity that came my way. Those words were "obscurity, anonymity, and insignificance." God was clear with me. I was to labor in obscurity. I was to embrace anonymity. I was to pursue insignificance. The words still sound strange to me even as I write them. The way of life God continues to call me to still feels very foreign and yet I am more convinced than ever it is right for me. Why these words you might ask? Because God knows my heart. He knows I am an achievement addict. He knows I have spent so much of my life chasing worldly success. Even in the church. He knows I love being the center of attention. He knows I love being recognized for the work I've done. He knows how much I like earthly rewards. So out of love, He calls me to walk away. To go the opposite direction. To cut against the grain of my natural way of being. In essence, this is what "denying myself" looks like on a daily basis. What does this mean practically for me? It means I will never seek another job nor ask for another raise nor pursue any accolades nor draw attention to myself. It means I will spend my life building up others. Honoring those around me. Using all my resources to make sure those around me find success.

I resonate with Joseph. As a young man, he was arrogant and proud. He was the favored son. He was charismatic and successful. He had dreams and visions of glory. He believed he would rule over his family and clan. And he believed all of this was God-ordained. This all feels very familiar to me. I love playing the hero. I was told from a young age that I could accomplish anything I set my mind to and to a large degree, that was true. I am an Eagle Scout. An honors student. A college athlete. I won the preaching prize at Princeton Theological Seminary. I've experienced great success in ministry. I have a wonderful wife and four wonderful children. But like Joseph, I've experienced hardship and suffering as well. Joseph was sold into slavery by his own brothers. Joseph was falsely accused of rape. Joseph languished forgotten in a prison for many years. All of those experiences humbled him. Brought him to his knees before God. And you can see the change in his heart when he is finally called before Pharaoh. Listen again to his words…

"Joseph answered Pharaoh, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer…Now therefore let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt…" (Genesis 41:16, 33) Joseph is clearly a changed man. He attributes all his success to God. He takes none of the credit for himself. He even relinquishes his need to be recognized or honored for his success in interpreting the dream. He lets go and lets God be in control. Joseph is content to return to prison if that is what the Lord wills for his life. Pharaoh, of course, sees what God has done in his life. Even testifies as such to his servants. "And Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?" And he raises Joseph up to the highest position possible in the kingdom. What Pharaoh doesn't realize, of course, is that this is all God's doing. God is at work here to give elevate Joseph not because Joseph deserves it. Not because Joseph has earned it. But because God has a plan and Joseph has a role

to play. “Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you.” And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.” (Genesis 41:16, 33, 38-41)

God still has a plan, friends. You and I have a role to play. It is not ours to seek out that role. It is not given to us to lay claim to that role. Our job is simply to be faithful. To be humble. To embrace the place where God has us and to trust Him to elevate us in His own time and according to His own will and good pleasure. It’s funny. Ever since I went through my own experience of hardship and suffering in Wisconsin almost fifteen years ago and learned to relinquish and let go of control of my life, the more God has entrusted to me. By the grace of God, I am a pastor. By the grace of God, I am a professor. By the grace of God, I am a missionary. By the grace of God, I am a leader in my denomination. None of these things are my achievements. They are gifts. God has raised me up for this particular season and God may lay me low in the next season. My job is not to get caught up or cling to what I have but simply to surrender and let Him use me as He sees fit.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 44-46

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January 21, 2022

U-Turn

Readings for today: Genesis 44-46

Father, open my eyes of my heart that I might see what You would have me see, learn what You would have me learn, and apply to my life the eternal principles You have revealed through Your Word.

Repentance is a deeply biblical concept. It literally means making a 180 degree turn in life. It requires a change of heart. It results in different decisions. Different behaviors. Different actions. When I read this passage today, I see repentance in Judah. Here's the man who first suggested they sell Joseph into slavery. In a very real way, he is responsible for all the hardship and suffering and pain in Joseph's life. Sure, one might argue Judah at least saved Joseph from being killed by his brothers which was the original plan but slavery might be a fate worse than death. And before we give him any credit, it's entirely possible he was motivated by financial gain rather than any altruistic feelings for his brother. As time went on, Judah experienced his own pain. Two of his own sons died and I wonder if this changed him? Is it possible he began to empathize with his father and the grief and loss he suffered when they told him Joseph had been killed? Is it possible he began to look back and reflect on what he had done to his brother and regret the actions he took that day? Clearly something has happened to Judah. He is not the same man he once was for when Joseph seeks to detain Benjamin, Judah literally offers up his own life as an exchange. He repents. He makes a 180 degree turn. He does what he should have done all those years ago.

For years, I struggled with anger. Those closest to me would often bear the brunt of my outbursts. Sure, I could justify my feelings with all sorts of reasons. It's not like I would fly off the handle for no reason. But the damage I did was significant. Finally, a counselor confronted me. He looked me in the eye and asked, "Doug, has anything good ever come from your anger? Does it get you closer or further away from your goals? Does it actually achieve the ends you're shooting for? How's it actually working for you?" I had no answers. Actually I did. I knew this counselor was correct. I justified my anger. I considered it righteous. I felt it necessary to get my point across. To demonstrate my seriousness. I wanted my children primarily to understand how much it hurt when they lied or shirked responsibility or broke the rules we had set for our home. Somewhere down deep, I felt anger was necessary to hold them accountable. I was believing a lie. James 1:20 says, "The anger of man doesn't bring about the righteousness of God." What I wanted more than anything else was for my family to be righteous. I wanted my children to be righteous so when the counselor confronted me with those questions, I knew something had to change. I knew I had to change. I needed to repent and ask for forgiveness. Life in our home is much different now. Sure, my kids still press my buttons from time to time. It's not like my teenagers have suddenly become angels. ;-) At the same time, I am a different person. God has transformed my heart. Anger is no longer my primary response. In fact, it is a very rare occurrence. My relationships with my kids has never been better and I am thankful for the grace they have shown me. I am just a broken man and a broken dad trying my best to follow Jesus.

What about you? Where is God calling you to repentance in your life? What relationships are broken and in need of restoration? Are you willing to let God do the deep work in your heart and soul to bring you to a different place? To make you a different person?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 47-50

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January 22, 2022

When Saints Suffer

Readings for today: Genesis 47-50

Father, Your Word literally reveals Your heart for Your people. It gives me wisdom and understanding into what it means to walk with You and before You. Teach me today how to think like You, speak like You, act like You, and ultimately, love like You.

Jacob is a broken man. When asked by Pharaoh to sum up the "days of his life", he describes them as "few and evil." He acknowledges he has not lived up to the standard of his fathers and forefathers. It seems clear he's talking about more than longevity here. More than wealth. More than power. He has suffered. His losses have been grievous. The consequences for his sins have cost him dearly. He's estranged from his twin brother. He defrauded his uncle. He's buried both his wives. He thought he lost two of his sons. His oldest son shamed him deeply by sleeping with a member of his harem. Two of his other sons put his clan at great risk when they massacred a village. The famine he's just survived has taken it's toll. Now he stands before Pharaoh. He's asked to sum up the years of his life. He's asked to give an account of all that has happened to him. But rather than thank God for all that He has done for him, including restoring Joseph and Benjamin to his embrace, Jacob despairs. It's terribly sad and heartbreaking.

Life for the faithful can be hard. Some of the difficulties we face are the result of our own actions or inactions. They are the consequences of our behavior, both the good and the bad. Some of the challenges we face are completely outside our control. Natural disasters. Crippling disease. Violence and war. There is a myth out there that those who truly believe will always experience blessing. They will be wealthy. They will be powerful and influential. Everything they touch will turn to gold. This is patently false. There is another myth out there that those who are faithful to God will never experience depression or deep sadness or despair. Again, this is patently false. The sufferings of this present life often take us to the end of ourselves and beyond. The sufferings of this world are often too much for us to bear. Despite what you may hear, God often gives us more than we could ever handle so that we will learn to rely on Him. I have seen this in my own life. I know many other saints who have experienced this as well.

Consider the example of Mother Theresa. A literal saint of a woman who dedicated her life to serving Christ among the poorest of the poor in Kolkata. She was revered for her work. She won the Nobel Prize. She was recognized and honored the world over for her sacrifice. But after her death, her private memoirs were published and it was revealed that she had experienced the absence of God for the last half-century of her life. She felt like she was wandering in spiritual darkness. She was deaf to God's voice. Blind to His presence. She didn't experience Him in worship or in the Eucharist or as she served Him alongside the broken. And it wasn't because of her sin. She was experiencing what many Christians have experienced throughout history. It's called the "dark night of the soul." A terrifying walk through the valley of the shadow of death where everything is stripped from us, including the sense of God's abiding presence. Does this mean God has abandoned us? Not at all. Did Mother's Theresa's experience mean that God had abandoned her? Not a chance. Just as God never left poor Jacob, He never leaves us. He is with us even when we cannot sense Him or see Him or feel His presence. Be encouraged by the words of the Psalmist, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will not fear for Thou art with me."

Readings for tomorrow: None

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January 24, 2022

Suffering

Readings for today: Job 1-5

Father, the devil prowls about like a lion looking for someone to destroy. The accuser of my soul is always alive and well seeking to devour all that is good in my life. Teach me to resist the devil that he may flee. Help me to place my confidence in the One who is stronger. The One who is Savior. The One who holds me in the palm of His nail-scarred hands.

"Does Job fear God for no reason?" It's a haunting question. Job not only feared God, he reverenced Him and held Him in awe. Job respected God and honored God. Job loved God and devoted His life to Him. To fear God in the Old Testament means giving God His due. Treating God as He rightfully deserves. Humbly acknowledging the infinite gap that exists between us. Job did all these things and more but the Accuser (this is what "satan" literally means in the original Hebrew) comes before God to test that loyalty. Some wonder if this book is literal or allegory. Did a man named Job actually exist or is this a book written to help God's people process the problem of evil and suffering in the world? It is the oldest book in the Bible. The first one to be written. And that makes sense to me for it deals with one of the foundational – if not the most foundational question of our existence – why do we love God? Why do we honor God? Why do we fear God?

Satan argues Job fears God because of the blessings he's been given. "Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." Satan believes if everything Job has is stripped away he will curse God and renounce his faith. It doesn't work. In response to the loss of all his possessions and the tragic death of all his children, Job responds, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." Satan's next tactic is to attack Job's physical health and mental well-being. "Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." Again, his plan fails. His accusations don't stick. Job contracts a terrible disease. He is a physical horror. Terrifying to look at. He sits in the ashes, scraping his sores with the broken pottery of his former life. Still he holds fast to faith, "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

The rest of the book is a litany of Job's anguish and anger at God. He yells. He screams. He weeps. He is bitter. He is resentful. He is demanding. He refuses to accept easy answers. Refuses to settle for superficial theology. He plumbs the depths of unimaginable pain and suffering. And the most amazing part of the story comes at the end when he finally comes to the end of himself and finds God waiting for him there. I don't know if Job was a real person but the question this book raises is one of the most real a believer can possibly face. Do we fear God for no reason? Do we love God for who He is or because of the blessings He has poured out on our lives? Will our love stand the test of suffering? There are no easy answers. One only faces this question when one comes face to face with the end of themselves and there in the darkness, they find God.

Andrew Brunson is a missionary and pastor. He was imprisoned for his faith in Turkey. For two years or more, he languished as his fate became a subplot in an international standoff between the United States and Turkey. Everything he had was taken from him. Twenty years of faithful work in country was flushed down the drain. He was barely allowed access to his family or the outside world. The

charges he faced were untrue. The trials he endured were unjust. He suffered from terrible bouts of depression and despair. After he was released, he spoke at a national meeting I attended. He relayed all he had endured. He made no attempt to glorify his persecution. He spoke humbly and authentically and powerfully about how he reached such a low point, he lost faith. But in that moment when he had nothing left. In that moment when he let everything go. In that moment when all hope was literally lost. All he found himself saying over and over again was “Jesus…Jesus…Jesus.”

You and I may never suffer like Job or Andrew but we are all familiar with pain. We all know heartache. We all know what it’s like to feel bitter disappointment. We’ve all tasted suffering on some level. We all probably know what it feels like to come to the end of ourselves. The question we will all have to face in those moments – if we haven’t had them already - is this…”Do we fear God for no reason?” When everything is stripped away, is God enough? Is He sufficient? Is He worthy of our love and devotion simply because He is God?

Readings for tomorrow: Job 6-9

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January 25, 2022

Compassion

Readings for today: Job 6-9

Father, so often I get anxious in the face of suffering. I want to rush to solve the problem, relieve the pain, find some reason or rationale to explain it. Help me to manage my own anxiety so that I might truly sit with those who are hurting in the ashes of their lives and love them in the midst of it all.

“Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, 'A man is conceived...Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire?...Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul?” These are just a few of the gut wrenching questions Job asks. After experiencing so much misery. So much tragedy. So much pain. He finally reaches the point of utter despair. His friends are at a loss. They don’t know how to help. They are afraid for their friend. And as they sit with their friend in the ashes of his life, an anxiousness begins to grow within them. Every word Job speaks only increases their anxiety. Their feelings of helplessness. Their feelings of hopelessness. Finally, they can’t take it anymore and they begin to respond.

How do I know this is what Job’s friends are experiencing? Because it’s what I experience every time I walk into a similar situation with people I love. I have been in the emergency rooms with parents as they said goodbye to their children. I have been in the neonatal units watching infants struggle for every breath. I have sat at the bedside of those dying from cancer and tried to bring comfort to their loved ones. I have been in the developing world and seen life-threatening poverty. I have prayed over men and women whose condition is utterly hopeless because they simply do not have access to the resources they need to survive. In EVERY single case, I feel helpless. Inadequate. Afraid. Frustrated. These anxious feelings threaten to overwhelm me and, if I am not careful, can cause me to say things more for my own benefit than for the good of others. This is what we see playing out in Job’s conversations with his friends. They are experiencing all kinds of emotions as they sit with Job and eventually reach a breaking point where they feel they have to respond.

Eliphaz is the first to speak. “Is not your fear of God your confidence, and the integrity of your ways your hope? Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off?” (4:6-7) Now this is a theologically true statement. The fear of God is our confidence. Walking in integrity with God is our hope. God promises to protect the innocent and the upright. These things are all true. At the same time, speaking these words to a man who has lost all he holds dear and who, even now, suffers from sores and wounds that are infected with worms is insensitive and superficial. What Job needs is not an answer to why he is suffering but friends who will simply sit and listen and let him process his pain for however long it takes. Yes, it is true that “man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.“ (5:7) But for Eliphaz to suggest to Job that if they could exchange places, he would “would seek God, and to God would I commit my cause, who does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things without number” (5:8-9) is patently absurd. Eliphaz simply has no idea how he would respond were he in Job’s condition and that’s why his words fall on deaf ears.

Job responds with a stinging rebuke. "He who withholds kindness from a friend forsakes the fear of the Almighty. My brothers are treacherous as a torrent-bed, as torrential streams that pass away...They are ashamed because they were confident; they come there and are disappointed. For you have now become nothing; you see my calamity and are afraid.” (6:14-15, 20-21) He clearly sees their fear. He clearly sees their discomfort. He clearly sees their anxiety as they sit helpless before him. He knows they are struggling with how to respond. But he also knows Eliphaz’s answer is to far too simplistic.

Suffering and sin do not exist in a one to one relationship. This situation has nothing to do with cause and effect. Eliphaz's theology is far too superficial to explain why some people suffer in extraordinary ways when they have not extraordinarily sinned. Nor is it adequate to explain why some people prosper in extraordinary ways when they clearly are extraordinary sinners!

Once again, Job cries out to God. "What is man, that you make so much of him, and that you set your heart on him, visit him every morning and test him every moment? How long will you not look away from me, nor leave me alone till I swallow my spit? If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of mankind? Why have you made me your mark? Why have I become a burden to you? Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity? For now I shall lie in the earth; you will seek me, but I shall not be." (7:17-21) This is raw. This is real. This is the kind of honest emotion God invites from His children. We can talk to God about anything. Nothing's off limits. Nothing scares God. He's a big boy. He can handle even the deepest of our emotions. And Job's words here in this passage invite us to share our deepest, most intimate thoughts and feelings with God.

But such raw emotion is too much for Bildad. He feels he has to rush to God's defense. (As if God ever needs us to defend Him!) "Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right? If your children have sinned against him, he has delivered them into the hand of their transgression. If you will seek God and plead with the Almighty for mercy, if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore your rightful habitation." (8:3-6) Brutal. Harsh. Unloving. Uncaring. Your children died because they sinned? Chalk that one up to "things never to say to people who are in pain!" But Bildad goes even further, insisting Job has clearly sinned and therefore deserves what he has received. If only Job will seek God (as if Job hasn't!!!), then he will be healed and restored.

Job clings to his faith. He continues to acknowledge the sovereignty of God. "Truly I know that it is so: But how can a man be in the right before God? If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand times...How then can I answer him, choosing my words with him? Though I am in the right, I cannot answer him; I must appeal for mercy to my accuser...If it is a contest of strength, behold, he is mighty! If it is a matter of justice, who can summon him? Though I am in the right, my own mouth would condemn me; though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse...For he is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together. There is no arbiter between us, who might lay his hand on us both." (9:2-3, 14-15, 19-20, 32-33). Though Job is not "guilty as charged", he understands his position before God. This really isn't about guilt or innocence because again, suffering and sin do not exist in a one to one relationship. This is about Job's pain not his purity. This is about Job's suffering not his sanctity. This is about Job's heartbreak not his holiness. He is hurting and out of his hurt, he cries out to God.

Where are you hurting today? What heartbreaks have you experienced in your life? Where have you found yourself crying out to God? Or perhaps struggling to cry out to God out of fear of judgment? Know He is there for you. He is waiting for you. He is sitting with you now even in your pain. Where have you been like Job's friends? Struggling to find the right words to say when all you want to do is escape the situation? Have you ever said things more to ease your own conscience than to help the one in need? Repent. Confess. Ask for forgiveness and then ask God for the courage to have compassion. To sit with those in pain. To stand with those who suffer. To mourn with those who mourn.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 10-13

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January 26, 2022

Facing the Darkness

Readings for today: Job 10-13

Father, in the darkest moments of my life, I have found You faithful. You met me in my depression. You met me in my despair. Help me to remember You are always with me despite what I may be feeling or experiencing in a given moment or season of life.

Fear. Anger. Depression. These are familiar feelings. The fall of 2009 was a dark period in my life. My ministry lay in ruins all around me and I was utterly broken. I had resigned. As far as I knew, my career was over. I had a little severance but no idea what was next. How would I provide for my family? How would I feed my four children? My wife worked but it wasn't near enough to cover the bills. I was desperate. Alone. Afraid. For several months, I averaged about three to four hours of sleep a night. The rest of the time I would pace up and down in my living room, crying out to God. Fighting with God. Yelling at God. Weeping before God. The experience was deeply humbling. It took me to the end of myself and beyond. I was stripped. Laid bare before the Lord. Much of what I held dear was taken from me. My life shaken to its foundations.

"Why did you bring me out from the womb? Would that I had died before any eye had seen me and were as though I had not been, carried from the womb to the grave. Are not my days few? Then cease, and leave me alone, that I may find a little cheer before I go—and I shall not return— to the land of darkness and deep shadow, the land of gloom like thick darkness, like deep shadow without any order, where light is as thick darkness." (Job 10:18-22) I resonate with these words from Job. In the darkest time of my life, Job was my counselor. I spent hours with him, pouring over his words. Job gave me permission to acknowledge the darkness. Job gave me courage to face the darkness. Job helped me understand that it is in the deepest darkness of our lives, our lowest point, that we finally come face to face with God. It's a terrifying experience. To come before the Lord naked. With empty hands. With nothing of our own to cling to. To walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

Shall we accept good from God and not evil? Those were Job's words to his wife when he was stricken with disease. For me, it was the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand." (Is. 53:10) Yes, I know these words refer primarily to Jesus but the Spirit impressed them on my heart as well. What if it's God's will to crush me? To put me to grief? Is my theology big enough to include the temporal suffering of the righteous? Clearly, for Zophar and the rest of Job's friends, it is not.

"If you prepare your heart, you will stretch out your hands toward him. If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away, and let not injustice dwell in your tents. Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish; you will be secure and will not fear." (Job 11:13-15) Zophar takes the knife from Bildad and twists it deeper. Job continues to defend himself against his well-meaning but misguided friends. He rejects their superficial understanding of God. He continues to press his case against the Almighty. Job is processing his faith out loud as it were. He has reached the point of despair and the open question that looms over this entire book is this - will God answer? Will God respond? Will God meet us in our despair?

Job seems to believe so. "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him..." (Job 13:15) Does our faith transcend even death? Does our hope and trust in the Lord extend beyond the boundaries of this life? In

our darkest moments, do we believe “even the darkness is not dark to You? The night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with You.” (Psalm 139:12) This is what I discovered. When things were at their most desperate. When life was at its most uncertain. When everything I held dear was slipping through my grasp, this one truth remained. God. And when that realization came flooding in, everything changed. Not my circumstances. Not my fortunes. Not my future. Those things were still very real and very scary and it took a long time to fully recover. No, what changed for me was the orientation of my heart. The orientation of my soul. My faith moved from my head to my heart to an even deeper place. I received from God a foundation not made with human hands that continues to sustain me to this day.

Suffering is never without purpose. Not with God. In fact, it’s often where He does His best work.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 14-17

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January 27, 2022

The Problem of Pain

Readings for today: Job 14-17

Father, help me attend to the pain of the world. The pain of those I love. The pain of those I live among. Help me to find the courage to walk back into pain even when everything in me wants to run or avoid or close my eyes or shut my ears. For there is where I will find You.

"Pain won't kill you." Miss Sarah shared those words with me when I first visited her. She was 95 and living at home by herself. I was all of 29 years old and a freshly minted pastor just out of seminary. As I listened to her story, my heart just broke. She had been battling a host of diseases for decades. She had fought off various cancers. She could barely walk due to her COPD. She had a degenerative back condition that left her in excruciating pain. She was also one of the meanest, nastiest people you will ever meet. She treated the home health nurses that cared for her terribly. Constantly cussing them out and calling them names. She did the same to her family to the point where they hated coming around. I visited her about once a month to serve her communion since she was one of our homebound members. There were many times I left without serving her the elements because she refused to confess her sins before the Lord and I refused to make a mockery of the sacrament. During those times, she would cuss me out as I headed out the door. But she always welcomed me back the next month and along the way there would be these breakthroughs. Moments of grace where a window would open into her soul. She would weep. She would confess. She would repent. Those were sacred moments where God's Spirit rushed in.

The pain Job feels is relentless. It is ruthless. It is excruciating. With no end in sight. He longs for death. Longs for the release of the grave. (I cannot tell you how many times I prayed with Miss Sarah for the Lord to take her as she slept. This was her most heartfelt prayer request.) The way Job describes his experience is almost painful in itself…

"But the mountain falls and crumbles away, and the rock is removed from its place; the waters wear away the stones; the torrents wash away the soil of the earth; so you destroy the hope of man...He feels only the pain of his own body, and he mourns only for himself." (Job 14:18-19, 22)

"Surely now God has worn me out; he has made desolate all my company. And he has shriveled me up, which is a witness against me, and my leanness has risen up against me; it testifies to my face. He has torn me in his wrath and hated me; he has gnashed his teeth at me; my adversary sharpens his eyes against me...I was at ease, and he broke me apart; he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces; he set me up as his target; his archers surround me. He slashes open my kidneys and does not spare; he pours out my gall on the ground. He breaks me with breach upon breach; he runs upon me like a warrior." (Job 16:7-9, 12-14)

"My spirit is broken; my days are extinct; the graveyard is ready for me." (Job 17:1)

Job's pain is an endless cataract, cascading down on his body, mind, and soul. There is never an end to it. It is so terrible and horrifying, I'm sure it made Eliphaz want to squeeze his eyes shut and close his ears. He simply cannot handle what he's seeing and hearing. So he opens his mouth again and this time one can hear his frustration. "But you are doing away with the fear of God and hindering meditation before God...Your own mouth condemns you, and not I; your own lips testify against you...Why does your heart carry you away, and why do your eyes flash, that you turn your spirit against God and bring

such words out of your mouth?" (Job 15:4, 6, 12-13) I cannot tell you the number of times I got frustrated listening to Miss Sarah. Over and over again, I felt compelled to rebuke her. Correct her. Challenge her. Her racist rants were offensive. The way she spoke of her kids disrespectful. Even the way she talked about God made me angry. I cannot tell you the number of times I threw up my hands and walked away. And yet, God's Spirit kept bringing me back. Forcing me to walk into her living room where she lay in her hospital bed and engage her once again.

C.S. Lewis once said, "Pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." The reality is God was trying to "rouse" Miss Sarah. In the midst of her suffering, He reached out for her over and over again. His love never wavered. His faithfulness never failed. His grace never reached its limit. As dark as things have gotten for Job - and they will get darker still before the dawn - God is present. Always there. Hovering in the background for now but by the end of the book, manifesting Himself in all His glory. And for centuries, He has used Job's pain as a megaphone to rouse our deaf and dying world.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 18-21

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January 28, 2022

Hearing Job

Readings for today: Job 18-21

Father, my only hope in life and death is that I belong body and soul to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He reigns sovereign over my life. He is good and righteous and faithful and true. He will never leave me or forsake me. This is my hope. Help me to hold fast to what I believe even when everything around me seems to be falling apart.

In the midst of his terrible suffering, Job holds fast to three fundamental convictions...
God is sovereign.
God is good and just.
God is faithful.

These convictions give him the strength to resist his friends when they offer their simplistic, superficial, and ultimately heretical explanations. They also give him the courage to stand before the judgment seat of God, trusting the Lord for vindication. We see this reflected in what are perhaps the most famous verses in the Book of Job, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!” (Job 19:25-27) Job, of course, has no idea who Jesus is. The life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God will not be revealed for many centuries. But Job does have faith. He looks forward, as do all the Old Testament saints, to a future yet to be revealed, trusting in a God who will make all things right and all things new.

Job’s suffering resists all logic. It resists any and all attempts to make sense out of it. It resists the formulaic notions we have about cause and effect. Blessing and curse. Health and wealth. It forces us to grapple with the hard truth that the righteous do suffer. The unrighteous do prosper. Bad things happen to good people. Good things happen to evil people. There is no rhyme or reason to these things. Time and chance happen to us all as the writer of Ecclesiastes once wrote. The world we live in is broken. Utterly. Completely. It is a world enslaved to the power of Sin. A world ruled by the tyrannical fear of Death. If things happen to go well for us in this world, it is not because we are good or because we earned it. It is far more likely that it is random chance. This is why we cannot set our hearts on the things of this earth but on things above.

A friend of mine recently watched a show where the Book of Job was featured. The conclusion of the character who was wrestling with the text was that ultimately all Job received in the end was new children and a case of PTSD. That’s actually a common interpretation of the text both in our culture today and in many churches. Like Job’s friends, it’s a far too simplistic approach to the text. It betrays our unwillingness to really sit and take the time to “hear” Job. To marvel at his courageous faith. To wonder at his steadfast, some may call it stubborn, refusal to let go of the goodness and justice and sovereignty of God. Why doesn’t Job ever throw in the towel? Why doesn’t Job do what his wife suggested at the beginning? Why doesn’t Job curse God and die like so many have throughout the centuries and like so many do today? Because Job believes. Job has faith. He knows his Redeemer lives! He knows he will meet God face to face after he dies! He trusts God to be faithful! Trusts God to be sure! Trusts God to be true! Trusts God to be good! And though it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God, Job ultimately trusts God for his vindication.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 22-24

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January 29, 2022

Doubling Down

Readings for today: Job 22-24

Father, above all, I long to place my trust in You. Far too often I place my trust in myself. My ability. My wisdom. My resources. My desires. They almost always fail me. Help me to learn to look beyond the temporary pleasures of this world to that which is eternal.

I remember vividly the last time I gambled at a casino. It was in the late nineties before I became a pastor. I was on a business trip to Las Vegas and a friend of mine and I decided to play craps. We had a good night. When it came time for me to roll, I hit a hot streak. Rolled for almost an hour without hitting a seven. It was crazy. People were cheering. Money was being made hand over fist. Frankly, I've never experienced anything quite like it. In the middle of all the chaos, a homeless man shuffled in. The lines in his face told the story of a hard life on the streets. He hadn't showered in days. His teeth were almost gone. His eyes were blurry and unfocused. He held a crumpled up $20 bill he'd found in the gutter somewhere. He threw it down on the table. I promptly rolled a seven. The board cleared. The run was over. Everyone turned on this man. They cursed him. They jeered him. He just turned and shuffled away, never saying a word.

I sometimes think about that man when I pray. I wonder where he is? Where life took him? If he ever got any help or if he just continued to barely survive on the streets? Doubling down each chance he got when someone gave him some money? I think about my own life. In so many ways, I am just like him. Doubling down on the sin in my own heart rather than humbly submitting to God. As I read Eliphaz's words this morning, I can feel his frustration boiling over. The general theological principle he's held to his entire life - the righteous prosper, the unrighteous are punished - has failed him. But rather than humbly recognizing the failure and taking a step back, he doubles down. He attacks his dear friend Job. He accuses him of crimes against God. "Is not your evil abundant? There is no end to your iniquities." (Job 22:5) You have robbed your brothers. You have stripped the naked. You have withheld water from the thirsty. You have not fed the hungry. You have treated widows and orphans with disdain. Over and over again, he verbally assaults his friend. Some have asked why Satan is not more visible in this story? Do we not hear him in the accusations Job's friends lob over and over again?

How does Job respond? He doubles down on God. "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat! I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know what he would answer me and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; he would pay attention to me. There an upright man could argue with him, and I would be acquitted forever by my judge." (Job 23:3-7) Job is confident in God's justice and righteousness. Confident God will hear his prayers. Confident God would pay attention to him, unlike his friends who seem so bent on contending with him.

The problem, of course, is Job can't seem to find God in the midst of his suffering and pain. Though he's assailed the heavens, they seem shut up. Though he's cried out, all he's received so far is deafening silence. Job has done his best but to no avail. "Behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I do not perceive him; on the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him; he turns to the right hand, but I do not see him." However, he does not despair. Why? Because he trusts God. "He (God) knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold." (Job 23:10) Though Job can't seem to find the way to God, God knows the way to him. And at the end of all the trials and

all the trauma, Job is confident God will make things right. Job is confident he will emerge better than before. Refined. Purified. Sanctified as God separates the gold from the dross in his life.

Admittedly, I am partial to these verses. When things have been at their darkest in my own life. When I've struggled with uncertainty and doubt and fear. When the trials I've faced have taken me to the end of myself. The end of my resources. The end of my plans. Job 23:10 has been my comfort and my hope. I know what it's like to double down on sin. I know what it's like to double down on self-destruction. I know what it's like to double down in my pride and arrogance. And in those moments, God has broken me utterly and completely. Humbled me in so many ways. He has laid me low to teach me about His sufficiency and grace. He has used the trials of my life to refine me. Purify me. Sanctify me. And His work is not done. Not until I reach glory.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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January 31, 2022

The Danger of "Worm" Theology

Readings for today: Job 25-28

Father, help me to see myself as You see me. Created in the image of God. Set a little lower than the angels. Crowned with glory and honor. Fallen? Yes. Sinful? Undoubtedly so. Broken? Without a doubt. Loved? Beyond all measure.

I found myself getting tears in my eyes today as I read these words from Bildad. "How can man be in the right before God? How can he who is born of woman be pure? Behold, even the moon is not bright, and the stars are not pure in his eyes; how much less man, who is a maggot, and the son of man, who is a worm!" Tragically, I've known far too many Christians who've believed such lies. I've heard far too many preachers who've proclaimed such lies. I am quite sure I myself fell into these lies when I was young and foolish. Before I became acquainted with grief and suffering. The Bible is clear. Human beings are made in the image of God. (Gen. 1:27) Human beings are crowned with glory and honor and made a little lower than the angels. (Psalm 8:5) Human beings are loved beyond all measure. (John 3:16) As such, we must reject any theology that declares us to be something we are not. We are not maggots. We are not worms. We are not despised or rejected or scorned or shamed. We beloved.

Now I know why the Bildads of the world believe such things. The Bible is just as clear that we are conceived in iniquity and born into sin. (Psalm 51) All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23) None of us is righteous and even are good deeds done with the best of intentions are not pure. (Isaiah 64:6) Yes, the gulf that exists between us and God is vast and immeasurable. He is the very definition of holiness and purity and by comparison, one might indeed conclude that we are like maggots or worms. But this is not a helpful comparison! In fact, it's not even a biblical comparison! Over and over again, the Bible declares the utter uniqueness of God. "Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" (Ex. 15:11) God is wholly other. He stands alone without equal or peer. He is always separate and distinct from all He has made. He exists on a level we cannot fathom or understand. Nor are we intended to. Our role is to worship. Our role is to obey. Our role is to serve. We are not to seek to be like God. That was the original temptation in the Garden! Instead we are to seek to bring God glory. To honor God with our lives. To bear His image with humble and glad and obedient hearts.

C.S. Lewis once said that humility is not thinking more highly of yourself than you ought or less of yourself than you ought but simply thinking of your "self" less. We see this dynamic play out throughout the Bible. There are times when God's people think more highly of themselves than they ought. Adam and Eve in the Garden. Many of the kings of Israel and Judah. The false prophets who claim to speak for the Lord. It never ends well. God's judgment puts them in their place. Then there are the times when God's people think less of themselves than they ought. I think of the despair of the people in Egypt. Those moments when God's people felt forgotten in exile. Jeremiah's laments. This too is not good. In these moments we see God encourage, confront, and exhort His people to remember who they are and, more importantly, whose they are! You see, the key to humility is taking our eyes off ourselves and keeping them fixed on Jesus. He is the author and perfecter of our faith! He will bring to completion the good work He has begun in everyone who believes in Him!

Readings for tomorrow: Job 29-32

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February 1, 2022

The Danger of Self-Justification

Readings for today: Job 29-32

Father, probe the depths of my heart. Reveal to me where I seek to justify myself before you or stand on my own righteousness. Help me to see the helplessness of my spiritual condition not so that I will despair but so that I will all the more praise You for what You've done for me in Jesus Christ.

Charles Spurgeon once wrote, "If any man thinks ill of you, do not be angry with him, for you are worse than he thinks you to be." I remember running across this quote when life was at its darkest and I was struggling to understand what had happened. The people I worked for lacked integrity. They treated me poorly. They were purposefully deceitful and evasive and lacked transparency. Furthermore, one of them made it his mission in life to not only undermine the work I was doing but took every chance he could to speak ill of me. Accuse me. Spread false rumors about me. To top it all off, these folks were Christians! They worked for the denomination I was part of at the time! It was brutal and it drove me to the point of despair. But then I read these words from Spurgeon and I realized that as badly as I was being treated, I deserved far worse. All of the things I was being accused of WERE actually happening in my heart. I was angry. I was frustrated. I was prideful and arrogant. I harbored resentment and bitterness. I refused to forgive and extend grace. When it hit me that I was all these things and more, I almost laughed out loud. It dawned on me that all my pent up emotions and feelings were just a cover for my own insecurity and fear. And once I confessed those insecurities and fears to God, I was set free. Free from the need to justify myself. Free from the need to be right. Free from the need to see justice done. Free from the need to please them and gain their approval. It was a life-changing experience for me.

Job's friends are an easy target in this book. Their theological purity brings little comfort to their suffering friend. Furthermore, their beliefs are far too simplistic. We all know the righteous are not always rewarded nor are the wicked always punished. So their attacks on Job are without warrant. Having said that...here's a mind-bender for you...Job actually believes the same way they do! Listen to what he says, "I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous and made him drop his prey from his teeth." (Job 29:14-17) The reality is Job believes his cause is 100% just. He believes he's done nothing to deserve his fate. Because he is a righteous man, he cannot imagine why God would allow these things to happen to him. "God has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes. I cry to you for help and you do not answer me; I stand, and you only look at me. You have turned cruel to me; with the might of your hand you persecute me. You lift me up on the wind; you make me ride on it, and you toss me about in the roar of the storm. For I know that you will bring me to death and to the house appointed for all living." (Job 30:19-23) Essentially Job is making the same argument his friends have made throughout the book. Why does God not reward the righteous and punish the wicked? Job clearly believes He should. Clearly is angry that He doesn't! Job holds fast to his integrity. He has not committed any sin worthy of his suffering. He even goes as far as recounting all his righteous deeds in chapter 31. Making his closing argument before God.

As readers, I am sure we find ourselves sympathizing with Job. Taking his side. We're convinced. The verdict is clear! Job must be in the right! But then...if we're careful to listen...we hear the soft whisper of Satan's initial question. "Does Job fear God for no reason?" The honest truth is Job DOES expect something from God. He expects an answer. He expects a justifiable reason for his suffering. Job

believes he's kept his end of the deal so by implication it must be God who has failed. (Important note: Job never actually says this…his faith refuses to let him go there.)

So let me put the question to all of us again...do we fear God for no reason? What are our expectations? Do we believe we deserve a guaranteed pass to heaven? Health? Wealth? Blessings in this life and the next? Or is God enough? Do we love God simply because He's God? If there were no eternal rewards. If there were no promises. If God never gave us a single thing, would He be worthy of our love and devotion?

Readings for tomorrow: Job 33-36

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February 2, 2022

Redemptive Suffering

Readings for today: Job 33-36

Father, suffering is hard to endure and even harder to understand. It's hard to me to wrap my head and heart around all the pain I see. Help me not so much to understand as much as to trust in Your promise that You will use all things for the good of those who love You and are called according to Your purpose.

"In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 1:6-7)

"For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." (Hebrews 12:10-11)

"For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead." (2 Corinthians 1:8-9)

There is such a thing as redemptive suffering. Suffering with a purpose. We may not always see that purpose and, in fact, it is often only revealed upon reflection after the fact. But that doesn't mean all suffering is meaningless or all suffering is bad or all suffering is to be avoided. Clearly, the first century believers suffered. 10 of the 12 Apostles would be tortured and executed in excruciating ways for their faith. (Judas committed suicide and John, though he suffered, died of old age.) Throughout the first three centuries of the church's existence, Christians were burned as torches in Nero's garden or thrown to the lions for sport in the arena. In certain regions of the Empire, they were systematically rounded up and killed. This was not only true back then but remains true in certain places around the world today. According to Christianity Today, it is estimated that over 70 million Christians have been martyred since the time of Jesus. They suffered and died in places all over the earth. Ottomon Turkey. Nazi Germany. Soviet Russia. Communist China and North Korea. Uganda. Sudan. Mexico. Columbia. And the suffering continues. I have seen it firsthand in Ethiopia and have spoken to eye witnesses in South Sudan, Djibouti, and Somalia.

The introduction of Elihu to the narrative represents a turning point in Job. At first glance, Elihu seems to be piling on. Repeating the same tired arguments of Job's friends. But a careful reading of the text reveals a significant shift. Elihu bursts on the scene declaring his anger at both Job and his three friends. He believes he has something new to offer that has not yet been said. So what is it that Elihu brings to the table? It is the idea that God allows and even uses the suffering of the righteous in order to purify and to save.

"Behold, in this you are not right. I will answer you, for God is greater than man. Why do you contend against him, saying, 'He will answer none of man's words'? For God speaks in one way, and in two, though man does not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men,

while they slumber on their beds, then he opens the ears of men and terrifies them with warnings...” (Job 33:12-15) Remember, they had no Bible. No written records. So the Word of God would come to them in visions and dreams. Why? To punish? To judge? To wound? To destroy? No, Elihu argues, it was so “that God may turn man aside from his deed and conceal pride from a man; he keeps back his soul from the pit, his life from perishing by the sword.” (Job 33:17-18) This is deeply significant as it adds a new layer of meaning to the story. God does allow suffering but it’s for our good. He uses suffering to purge pride from us. The pride Job himself suffers from. Yes, Job is a righteous man. Yes, Job is a blameless man. But Job is also a sinful man. Though he has a heart after God, he is not perfect and God will use his suffering (as we will see at the end of the book) to cleanse the depths of Job’s heart.

God not only warns us in dreams and visions and through His Word, he also allows and uses our physical pain for our good and for His glory. “Man is also rebuked with pain on his bed and with continual strife in his bones, so that his life loathes bread, and his appetite the choicest food. His flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen, and his bones that were not seen stick out. His soul draws near the pit, and his life to those who bring death.” (Job 33:19-22) If we follow the logic of Job’s friends - whom Elihu rebukes strongly - we would conclude that those who suffer deserve it. They should go down to death. But that’s not where Elihu lands. His God is not a harsh judge but a faithful, loving Father who delivers His children ultimately from their pain and suffering. “If there be for him an angel, a mediator, one of the thousand, to declare to man what is right for him, and he is merciful to him, and says, 'Deliver him from going down into the pit; I have found a ransom; let his flesh become fresh with youth; let him return to the days of his youthful vigor'; then man prays to God, and he accepts him; he sees his face with a shout of joy, and he restores to man his righteousness. He sings before men and says: 'I sinned and perverted what was right, and it was not repaid to me. He has redeemed my soul from going down into the pit, and my life shall look upon the light. Behold, God does all these things, twice, three times, with a man, to bring back his soul from the pit, that he may be lighted with the light of life.” (Job 33:23-30) The key phrase being that last sentence. It is God who does all these things for man in order to bring his soul back from the pit, lighted with the light of life.

This understanding squares with what Christians have believed throughout the centuries. Martyrs facing death without fear. Those who suffer enduring for the sake of something greater. They understand God is at work even in the middle of their pain. Not only bringing about His will and His glory but also continuing to sanctify and purify even their own hearts in the midst of it all. The reality is Job needs to be humbled and indeed will be humbled before the Lord of Hosts. We all need to be humbled and indeed one day will be humbled before the King of kings and Lord of lords. This is one of the most important lessons from the Book of Job.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 37-40:1-5, Psalm 19

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February 3, 2022

God Speaks

Readings for today: Job 37-40:1-5, Psalm 19

Father, help me to slow down. To quiet down. To rid myself of all distractions so that I might hear Your voice. You are speaking, am I listening? Am I ready to hear what You want me to hear? Ready to receive the message You have for me? Ready to obey the call You place on my life for today?

Many years ago, I worked at Boulder Community Hospital. I had just graduated from college. Just gotten married. Needed a job. So I applied to be a per diem Admissions clerk with the hope I could catch on full-time. After coming back from my honeymoon, several people had quit in the department and they offered me a position. A few weeks later, I got back from a friend's wedding and the lead person in the department had quit so they asked me to take that position. A few months after that, my manager walked out the door and they asked me to take that position. It was quite the whirlwind! I was 23 years old and running a department of 12-15 employees without any management or healthcare experience. Over the next year, three more departments were added to my plate and I ended up with about 50 employees reporting to me and I was the youngest manager by a decade or more. Then my director left. As they searched for a new one, I was invited into meetings to represent the business side of the hospital and offer my perspective as the person running all the frontline services. I still remember the last meeting I attended. I was pretty proud of myself at this point and I naturally had an opinion about everything. So I was in a meeting where we are discussing the launch of our nationally renowned sports medicine clinic. The executive director who I believe held both an MD and an MBA was talking about revenue streams and development plans and the entire leadership of the hospital was present. The president and the five vice presidents. All the directors and several members of the board. I was by far the youngest and lowest on the totem poll. Again, the only reason I was there was because the director position above me was still vacant. Right in the middle of the presentation, I interrupted to make what I thought was an important point. I attempted to correct the executive director in front of everyone. All eyes turned to me and I'll never forget his words, "Who the hell are you and why are you even here? If we want your opinion, we'll ask. Otherwise keep your mouth shut and stop wasting our time." I wanted to disappear. Unfortunately, the meeting lasted another hour and I had to just sit there in my embarrassment. Afterwards, my vice president came to me and let me know I wouldn't be attending any more meetings. ;-)

It was the worst moment of my life and yet it was the best moment as well. I learned humility the hard way. I learned about role clarity within an organization and how to know your place in the pecking order. I had no business being in a meeting of that magnitude much less speaking up. I had no understanding of the big picture. I had no appreciation for all the different factors in play. I was ignorant and clueless. Just like Job. In chapter 38, God finally answers Job from the whirlwind. He questions him over and over again. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" "Have you commanded the morning?" "Have you entered the springs of the sea?" "Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?" "Can you lift up your voice to the clouds?" Job answers the way any of us would. The way any of us should when we come face to face with the majesty and might of God. "Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further." (Job 40:4-5)

What is the main message of Job? God is God and we are not. We are not like Him. We cannot understand Him. We cannot begin to grasp the height and depth and breadth of His ways. He is all-powerful, all-knowing, and ever-present. He sees things we cannot see. He knows things we cannot

know. He hears things we cannot hear. To contend with God is utter folly for His ways are unsearchable. Who are we to question God? Who are we to call God to account? Who are we to demand anything from God? He keeps His own counsel. He does not need our advice. He does not ask our permission. Theologian Sally McFague once defined sin as “our refusal to accept our place.” It’s an unwillingness to embrace our role. It’s the prideful belief that we can be more or should be more or deserve more than what we have or what we have received. This was the original temptation, of course. Eat the fruit and you will be like God. You will know good and evil like Him. You will see what He sees. You will understand what He understands.

We still fall for it, don’t we? I know I do. Despite the humbling experience at BCH all those years ago, I still find myself struggling to accept the role God’s defined for my life. I have this insatiable appetite for more. In my pride, I think I can achieve more. Accomplish more. Do more. All for God’s Kingdom, of course, but if I’m totally honest, it’s for me as well. So I’ve made a commitment in my life. I will walk with open hands before the Lord. Whatever He wants to place in my hands, I will accept. What He does not place in my hands, I will not seek. If He wants to raise me up, I will embrace the challenge. If He wants to lay me low, I will humbly accept His will. This is what it means for me to humble myself before the Lord.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 40:6-42:17, Psalm 29

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February 4, 2022

Limits

Readings for today: Job 40:6-42:17, Psalm 29

Father, like yesterday, I want to learn to accept my place. Embrace my role. Understand my limits. In my pride, I tell myself I can do anything. But the reality is I am weak. I am finite. I am limited in so many ways. My limits too often lead to disappointment. But Father, you set these limits so that I might seek You. You create these limits that I might learn to depend on You. It is only through weakness that I discover the sufficiency of Your grace.

One of the versions of the Bible that I love to read, especially when it comes to poetry, is the Message. The translator, Eugene Peterson, has this way of making the text come alive for me. Listen to how He translates some of these final verses of Job…

"Look at the land beast, Behemoth. I created him as well as you. Grazing on grass, docile as a cow— Just look at the strength of his back, the powerful muscles of his belly. His tail sways like a cedar in the wind; his huge legs are like beech trees. His skeleton is made of steel, every bone in his body hard as steel. Most magnificent of all my creatures, but I still lead him around like a lamb! The grass-covered hills serve him meals, while field mice frolic in his shadow...And when the river rages he doesn't budge, stolid and unperturbed even when the Jordan goes wild. But you'd never want him for a pet— you'd never be able to housebreak him!" (Job 40:15-24)

"Or can you pull in the sea beast, Leviathan, with a fly rod and stuff him in your creel? Can you lasso him with a rope, or snag him with an anchor? Will he beg you over and over for mercy, or flatter you with flowery speech? Will he apply for a job with you to run errands and serve you the rest of your life? Will you play with him as if he were a pet goldfish? Will you make him the mascot of the neighborhood children?...What hope would you have with such a creature? Why, one look at him would do you in! If you can't hold your own against his glowering visage, how, then, do you expect to stand up to me? Who could confront me and get by with it? I'm in charge of all this—I run this universe!" (Job 41:1-11)

One of the reasons we read the Word of God is to be reminded of our place in this world. Reminded of how truly weak and finite and limited we are as human beings. You see, the reality is we too often act like we CAN tame Behemoth! We foolishly believe we can hook the Leviathan! We believe deep in our bones that nothing's impossible for us as long as we set our best minds and best resources and best efforts towards a single goal. Remember what we read in Genesis 11 about the Tower of Babel? "And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them." (Genesis 11:6 ESV) We fundamentally believe - in our pride and arrogance - that we can ascend to heaven. We don't need God. We can tame the world. Whether on a global, local, or even individual scale.

The Bible reminds us of our limits. It reminds of the boundaries of our existence. They are good. They are right. They are important. So many people read Job and are frustrated that he gets no straight answer from God. But in expecting or even demanding such an answer, we make the same mistake Job made. We put God in the wrong. We condemn Him so that we may be in the right. (Job 40:8) Would that we learn to respond to God like Job did at the end. Repenting in dust and ashes before the Lord. Only then can we expect the Lord to restore our fortunes, heal our land, revive our nation.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 1-4

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February 5, 2022
Unsung Heroines

Readings for today: Exodus 1-4

Father, so often it is the simple acts of faith that require the most courage. It is stuff of day to day living that makes the most impact. It is the ordinary decisions that bear the most extraordinary results. Help me to see every moment, every minute, every conversation, every person as pregnant with divine potential.

The Exodus story is one of the most powerful in human history. It is the great national narrative of the Jewish people. It brought hope to millions of African-Americans living under slavery and later, segregation in the Deep South. It inspired some of our greatest music, creating a whole new genre called “negro spirituals” that we continue to sing to this day. Artists, authors, and movie producers have all found it compelling. And it continues to galvanize those who suffer in captivity and bondage around the world.

It’s easy as we dive in to focus on Moses. His miraculous deliverance at birth. His attempt to deliver his people by murdering an Egyptian. His flight from Egypt. His encounter with God at the burning bush. And then his return back to his people as he takes up the mantle of leadership. Often overlooked is the courageous faith of the ordinary women who make all this possible.

First, the midwives. Shiphrah and Puah are two of the most underrated heroes in the Bible. Their faithfulness to God placed them in incredible danger and yet they refused to obey Pharaoh’s command. “But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live.” (Ex. 1:17) Their actions saved who knows how many children in Israel and God honored their faithfulness. “So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.” (Exodus 1:20-21) As an aside, I’ve heard many Christians question how God could honor their deceit since they lied to Pharaoh. This clearly betrays a lack of understanding of what it takes to survive in such a situation. Most who question have never experienced the brutalities of slavery, bondage, and oppression. They are unfamiliar with work-gangs, hard labor, and cruel task-masters who whip and abuse. The more we seek to understand the harsh circumstances they lived in every day, the more we can appreciate their bravery.

Second, the older sister. When Moses was born, his mother hid him for three months. But eventually the time came where she had to let him go. She placed him in a little basket-boat on the Nile, probably with the hope that somehow, someway his life would be preserved. His older sister followed the boat as it floated down the river. When she saw Pharaoh’s daughter discover the basket, she immediately ran up to offer to help. Again, this is an incredible act of courage. For all she knew Pharaoh’s daughter would drown her little brother right then and there and perhaps that is exactly what would have happened except for her swift actions. “Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." So the girl went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "Because," she said, "I drew him out of the water." (Exodus 2:7-10) Not only does she save Moses but she is able to reunite him with his mother while he is being nursed! It’s an incredible act of faith for such a young girl!

Third, Pharaoh's daughter. I've always wondered why she rescued Moses from the river? What motivated her to lift him out of the little basket and adopt him as her own? Did she the same thing in Moses that his mother saw? "The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child..." (Exodus 2:2) Or did she just take pity on a helpless baby? No matter her motivations, she too was acting courageously. Defying her father's orders to save this Hebrew child. Though she did not know God, she still was used by God to play a specific role in His salvation plan for His people.

It's amazing to think about, isn't it? The string of events that led to Moses appearing before God at the burning bush? It makes me think about my own life. What simple, yet courageous acts of faith am I being called to engage in that will further the Kingdom of God in this world?

Readings for tomorrow: None

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February 7, 2022

Getting to Know God

Readings for today: Exodus 5-9

Too often I make the mistake of reading Scripture through 21st century eyes. I subconsciously assume the people I read about in the Bible think like I do. But not only is there a massive cultural gap between 21st century America with our ideals of freedom and liberty and justice and fairness and ancient Egypt where Pharaoh was worshipped as a god but I also have to remember I live post-resurrection. I've been blessed to see the fullness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. The ancient Hebrews did not have this benefit. They did not yet know this God. They had no Bible. There were no Ten Commandments at this point in history. They had not yet appeared before Him at Mt. Sinai. They did not know how to worship Him. Furthermore, they had no real national identity. They had no land. No leadership. They were slaves. At best, they were a collection of loosely related people with a common ancestor and some stories about a God who once spoke to them.

In the ancient near eastern world, Egypt was the dominant power. Pharaoh was literally the most powerful man on earth. As such, he did not consider himself to be a man like any other man. He ruled with absolute authority. He held the power of life and death in his hands. His domain stretched for thousands of miles in every direction. He was wealthy beyond belief. His armies were feared. He truly believed he was divine. He truly believed the peoples of the earth existed to serve his needs and his purposes. So it comes as no surprise when Moses approaches him with a demand from Yahweh to let the Hebrews go that Pharaoh would have laughed. "Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover, I will not let Israel go." (Exodus 5:2) For all Pharaoh knew, this Yahweh was just another small-time, tribal god who had no power. After all, Yahweh had allowed His people to become slaves for hundreds of years. He was not a god to be respected, much less feared.

The Exodus story has so many layers and we make much of the drama between Pharaoh and Moses. But the real story is the conflict between Pharaoh and Yahweh. Yahweh is using Pharaoh as an instrument to reveal His true glory to the world. He says as much in Exodus 9:13-16, "Then the Lord said to Moses, "Rise up early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, "Let my people go, that they may serve me. For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth. For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." The Apostle Paul underscores this same idea in Romans 9:14-18, "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills." The reality is God is not going to relent with Pharaoh until he reaches a place of complete and total submission. God will not stop with the plagues until Pharaoh is completely broken and grasps the difference between himself and Yahweh, the Lord of the Universe. So plague after plague after plague rains down. The people of Egypt suffer. Their lands and livestock are largely destroyed. Fear begins to permeate the land as the Egyptians realize that the god they've come face to face with is no tribal deity! He is Yahweh! He is the Lord! He is God!

By the way, God isn't just revealing Himself to the Egyptians, He is re-introducing Himself to His people. He is reminding them who He is. He is teaching them about Himself. "Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord." (Exodus 6:6-8) After four hundred years of silence, God is once again on the move. He is fulfilling His promises in His time.

Now some may ask why God waited so long? What about the people who don't get to experience the miracle of the Exodus? What about those who had lived and died under the lash of the Egyptians? Here we come face to face with the fact that our God is no tribal god. His primary purpose is not to meet our needs. It's not to make sure we remain safe and happy and live a blessed life. No, God has a greater plan in mind and that is to reveal His glory to the world. This is why God delivered His people. To show forth His power and glory to the world. To leave no doubt as to who is God and who is not.

So the question then comes to us...will we believe this God? Will we trust this God? Will we worship this God? Will we harden our hearts like Pharaoh? Will we cling to our pride and continue to act like "little gods?" Or perhaps our spirits are broken by the pain we've suffered in this world. Perhaps belief is beyond us because of how beaten down we feel. Will we pray the prayer Thomas prayed, "Lord, help my unbelief?" Will we trust Christ above even our own thoughts, feelings, and fears?

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 10-13

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February 8, 2022

Hard Hearts

Readings for today: Exodus 10-13

Every year when I get to this point in my Bible reading, I struggle with the same thing. God hardening Pharaoh's heart. When I read those words, they don't feel good. They don't sound right. It doesn't seem fair. Was Pharaoh given no choice? It's one of the deepest mysteries in all of Scripture. So as we begin to wrestle with this concept, we need to acknowledge the obvious. We hate this truth. It runs counter to everything we've been raised to believe about free will, everyone getting a choice, and God loving everyone. It calls into question God's justice. God's righteousness. How could a righteous God harden someone's heart to the point where they are kept from saving faith? And yet, if we are courageous enough to take the text at face value, we are left with no other conclusion.

"Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants..." (Ex. 10:1)

"But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go." (Ex. 10:20

"But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go." (Ex. 10:27)

"Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh, and the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land." (Ex. 11:10)

God is relentless with this man. He will not let him repent. He will not let him escape judgment. He will not let him give in until his nation lies in ruins. God will not let up until there is no doubt who is God and who is not. Now this is hard for us. This is a different side to God that we aren't used to. A God who reigns over the affairs of humanity. A God who rules over the universe with a firm hand. A God who is to be feared as much as loved. So again, the question is pressed...how could a righteous God harden someone's heart to the point where they are kept from saving faith?

The key is how we define righteousness. Do we define it from a human perspective? Or a Biblical one? According to Scripture, God's highest aim is not the salvation of His people. That may be a new thought to you. It was to me when I first read through the Bible. As important as my salvation is to God, it is merely the "means" God choose to us to achieve a higher end. What is that "higher end?" The full display of God's power and glory and majesty and sovereignty over all creation. God's greatest aim is to fill the earth with His glory. His grand design calls for all creation to honor His great name. This is the purpose for which we were created and it is clearly revealed in the Exodus narrative.

"But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them." (Ex. 7:3-5)

"Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the Lord." (Ex. 10:1-2)

“Then the Lord said to Moses, "Pharaoh will not listen to you, that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 11:9)

And the Apostle Paul affirms God’s purposes when he looked back on the Exodus story. “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." (Rom. 9:17)

The point is clear. God will make His name known. And He chooses to make His name known through “vessels of mercy” (His people) and “vessels of wrath” (not His people). And lest we think this somehow compromises God’s justice or righteousness or goodness or it just isn’t fair; we have to remember our condition before God. All of us are dead in our trespasses. All of us have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. All of us deserve death and the torments of hell forever. None of us are innocent. None of us are free. We are in no position - broken, sinful, and rebellious as we are - to pass judgment on God. God is free to choose to use whom He wills in whatever way He wills and this in no way compromises His integrity.

So what does this mean for us? Does it mean we should be scared of God? Does it mean we are at the mercy of a God who is arbitrary and capricious? Not at all. In Jesus Christ, God has provided the perfect Passover Lamb! He Himself has become the sacrifice that saves! He blood delivers us from the angel of death! And because we have no idea whom God has chosen, we should go forth and gladly, even boldly, share this good news with the world!

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 14-18

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February 9, 2022

No Whining

Readings for today: Exodus 14-18

Years ago, I made a commitment to myself. I would do my best never to whine. Never to complain. This commitment came as a result of some work I was doing among the global poor. After seeing the conditions so many people live in around the world, I was overwhelmed by the blessings God has poured into my life. My life is rich and full. Yes, it is stressful at times. Yes, it can be demanding. But the challenges I face are nothing in comparison to what so many of my dear friends have to face on a daily basis. This commitment really isn't all that new. I've never been a big fan of whining. Just ask my kids. They will tell you one of my "hot buttons" is whining. It spins me up. It lights my fuse. I am not sure why. Perhaps it's because of how I was raised. Perhaps it's because of how hard I've had to work my entire life. Perhaps it's because of the difficulties I've had to face and overcome. It's such a tender spot for me that every time I read Exodus, I find myself getting a little frustrated, even angry, with God's people. They complain ALL THE TIME!

"They said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." (Ex. 14:11-12)

"And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" (Ex. 15:24)

"And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." (Ex. 16:2-3)

"Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" (Ex. 17:2-3)

These are the same people who literally watched God part the Red Sea! Literally watched God fight for them against the Egyptians! Literally watched God rain manna and quail down from heaven! Literally watched God bring water from a rock! How can they not believe? This year, God has given me some fresh insight. Rather than focus on all the whining and complaining, I am instead focusing on the provision of God. Over and over again, He responds not with anger but with blessing.

"The Lord said to Moses, "Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground. And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen...Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great power that the Lord used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses." (Ex. 14:15-18, 30-31)

“And Moses cried to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the Lord made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, saying, "If you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, your healer." (Ex. 15:25-26)

“Then the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not...And the Lord said to Moses, "I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'" (Ex. 16:4, 11-12)

“And the Lord said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink...” (Ex. 17:5-6)

It really is remarkable when you stop to think about it. God meeting the needs of His people over and over again. And while it’s extremely difficult to discern the tone of God’s voice as He speaks, I imagine it is sometimes tender. Sometimes stern. Sometimes there’s probably an edge to it and other times God is deeply compassionate. The point of it all is that God is revealing Himself as a loving Father who is teaching His children to know Him and love Him and depend on Him for all they need in this world. So God tests them. He challenges them. And as they experience His salvation - deliverance through the Red Sea…Egyptians and Amalekites destroyed…manna every day…quail every night…water from rocks…purified water from a bitter spring - this is how God raises His children. Even to this day.

So back to whining. If I’m honest, I’m a whiner as well. I do complain a lot. Deep down in my heart, I struggle all the time with frustrations and fears. Failures and uncertainty. I have these longings that go unfulfilled. I have these needs that go unmet. I often feel like I deserve more. Like I’m entitled because of all the hard work I’ve put in. All these emotions lie below the surface if I am totally transparent and how does God respond? He puts me to the test. He places me in situations where I have no choice but to cry out to Him. Why? Because He’s teaching me every single day what it means to be His child. To grow into His likeness and image. To become the man He’s created and called me to be.

Readings for tomorrow: 19-21

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February 10, 2022

Meeting God

Readings for today: Exodus 19-21

I try to imagine myself at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Coming face to face with the glory and power of God. Thunder. Lightning. Smoke. Fire. Clouds descending on the summit. It must have been an awe-inspiring sight. And then to hear the first words of God. Words of such grace. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Before we get to any of the laws and commandments and rules for living, we learn about relationship. This God is our God. This God delivered us from bondage and oppression. This God set us free from slavery. Remember the Israelites didn't really know this God. They hadn't really spent any time with Him. All they had were a few stories handed down over generations. Now God is giving them a new story. Now God is forming them into a new people. Now God is renewing the covenant He first made with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and further defining the relationship He will have with them.

I remember when I first met God. I too had been raised on the stories of God. Stories that had been passed down over the centuries. Stories in Sunday School. Stories from my parents. Stories of God's faithfulness and God's goodness. But then I came face to face with God on the campus of the University of Colorado in Boulder. Walking on the sidewalk one day reflecting on the Bible study I had attended the night before and suddenly feeling overwhelmed by God's presence. Realizing for the first time in my life that Jesus was not just some story but an actual Person who wanted to have a relationship with me! On that day, Jesus gave me a new story. He adopted me into His family. He renewed the covenant and further defined the relationship He desired to have with me. My life has never been the same.

Today's reading represents a hinge point in the Book of Exodus. We move from sweeping epic to Israelite case law and it's tempting to skip over this part. I remember my eyes glazing over during this section the first several times I read through the Bible in a year. Ha! However, if we slow down and read carefully, some wonderful truths are revealed. The laws God gives reveal His nature and character. They are similar and yet critically different than the laws of the nations around them. Almost all societies, even ancient ones, have laws prohibiting murder, stealing, lying, etc. Old Testament law is unique, however, in that it protects women, children, and families. It restricts revenge by instituting the principle of lex talionis - otherwise known as "an eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth" - thus making justice proportional. Furthermore, it makes slavery a voluntary arrangement. Available for those who cannot pay their debts. Freedom was a guarantee unless the slave himself chose otherwise. Protections were built in to prevent abuse and slave trading was punishable by death. "Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death." (Ex. 21:16) These are massive advances in human rights and set the nation of Israel apart from the other nations around them.

This is exactly God's point, by the way. Remember, in "Abraham" all the nations of the earth would be blessed. It will be through Abraham and his descendants (now starting to "outnumber" the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore) that the world will come to know Yahweh is God. Pharaoh's already learned this lesson the hard way. Other nations now have the opportunity to learn from Israel. To model their own national life and laws after the Law of God. In giving Israel His Law, God is setting them up to serve as a light to the nations. An example to the Gentiles. He wants the nations of the earth to see what life looks like in His Kingdom. When Israel is faithful to the Law, the nations will flock to her. She will experience blessing and peace and prosperity. When she disobeys the Law, she will be judged and punished thereby continuing to serve God's purposes as He makes an example of them in His

wrath. The point of it all is that God is now in relationship with Israel and Israel with God. She is bound to Him through His saving grace and He will never let her go.

The same is true for us today, friends. The church of Jesus Christ – made up of Jews and Gentiles together – is still being called to be the light of the world. The salt of the earth. As we lean into Christ, God's law is written on our hearts and we become a new people. May the town of Parker, the wider Metro Denver community, and even the world see what life looks like in God's Kingdom as they look to us!

Readings for tomorrow: 22-24

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February 11, 2022

Divine Principles

Readings for today: Exodus 22-24

Someone recently asked a great question, “If God were to come down and speak to us today, would his laws be the same or changed for the current day?” The laws we read about in Exodus, or later in Leviticus, definitely seem foreign and strange to us. They have to do with the customs of the ancient near east and while they represent in many cases significant advances in human rights for the time, we don’t often see them as such because of how far human civilization has advanced.

One key to answering this question can be found in the difference between Exodus 20:1 and 20:22. In Exodus 20:1, God gives the Ten Commandments. They are written on stone tablets by his very finger. They are words directly from the mouth of God. However, in Exodus 20:22, a shift takes place. Now Moses will become the lawgiver. He will be the one to flesh out the details of the laws that will govern the daily life of Israel. It’s one of the main reasons the people of God historically have kept the Ten Commandments but not necessarily kept all the laws of Moses as they are written.

A second key to answering this question is pushing beyond the letter of the law itself to the principles they represent. This is where our study of these laws becomes fruitful even in our 21st century American context. For example, it’s worth considering the dignity the Hebrews assigned to slaves, women, children, and families. Again, for their day, these were utterly unique among ancient law codes and represent a trajectory towards our understanding of modern human rights. Consider as well the laws of proportional justice which limit revenge by making the punishment fit the crime. This principle still undergirds much of our modern legal system today. The principle of restitution is another one we understand and practice. As is God’s concern for widows, orphans, and the poor.

At the same time, there are clear areas where we struggle to implement the principles God’s given us in His law. Consider our current national struggle with immigration and refugees. I know these are somewhat separate issues legally but what does our reading from Exodus today have to say about the principles that should shape our policies in these areas? Consider the following verses, “You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.” (Ex. 22:21) “You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.” (Ex. 23:9) “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed.” (Ex. 23:12) God makes it very clear to His people that they should treat the immigrants and refugees in their midst with compassion and mercy and kindness and care. Why? Because this is how God treated them when they were immigrants and refugees in Egypt. Now what would that look like in our context? It’s a worthy debate full of all sorts of complexity. But what’s not complex is God’s call for compassion. To treat those seeking asylum with dignity and honor because they are fellow human beings made in the image of God. Doing all we can to keep families together for example and come alongside them and care for them even as we work through the legal processes governing immigration in our modern world.

What’s the fundamental point? The most important truth that undergirds the entire law of God is this idea that we should treat one another as we have been treated by God Himself. We should extend to others the same kindness, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness that God has shown us. We should deal with one another righteously not just because “God said so” but because God DID so with us! This is

what it means to keep and follow God’s law and it’s something Jesus Himself will affirm in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) which, by the way, is simply a restatement of the Ten Commandments.

Readings for tomorrow: 25-28

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February 12, 2022

Tabernacle

Readings for today: Exodus 25-28

Today we read about the construction of the Tabernacle and it's easy to get lost in all the talk of cubits and curtain loops. It's easy to lose sight of the bigger picture when we're reading about the construction of lamp stands and the ark of the covenant. But if we take a step back and survey the scene, what we realize is that God is literally giving Israel a portable temple! The Tabernacle is God's fifth wheel! It will be His home on earth. His dwelling place among His people. Wherever they go, He will be with them! Wherever they find themselves, God will be there. They will have the opportunity to meet with Him. Hear His voice. Worship at His feet. "And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst...There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel." (Ex. 25:8, 22)

One of the many things I love about the Christian faith is that it's not bound to any particular time or place. Our God is no simple tribal god. He rules the universe. He reigns over all He has made. The earth is His and the fullness thereof. We don't have to "go anywhere" to meet with God because He makes sure to "tabernacle" with us. This is what the Apostle John means when he writes, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14) The Greek word for "dwelt" means "tabernacled" which means Jesus Himself is now the tabernacle of God! Jesus is Immanuel - God with us - no matter where we go or where we find ourselves. Through the Holy Spirit, He lives in our hearts which means we are never, ever alone and that's good news, amen? Because it's not good for us to be alone.

Friends, the most important thing to remember as you wade through all the blueprints and construction details of these chapters is that they are reflection of God's love. A demonstration of His commitment to you and to me and to His people down throughout the ages. He will be our God. We will be His people. He will not let us suffer in our sin forever. He will not let death have the victory. He will unite all things in Himself. He will bring all things together. He will bring all people together! He is at work even now in our hearts. Making Himself known to us. Making Himself known through us. God is just as present here on earth as He is in heaven. Embrace Him. Let His presence fill your heart and soul with hope.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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February 14, 2022

CHIEF OF SINNERS

Readings for today: Exodus 29-32

I remember my ordination process. It began when I was in college. It involved a lot of study. Attending seminary. Meeting with a committee from my denomination on an annual basis. Written and verbal ordination exams. It was fraught with challenges. Some of those challenges were human and sinful. I was part of a fairly progressive denomination at the time and there were certain people who did not approve of my evangelical faith and tried to make life as hard as possible on me. One of them even attempted to delay my ordination by layering in requirements that were unconstitutional. I was forced to appeal to the highest ecclesiastical court to get them overturned. It was crazy. Then there were my own failures that held me back. My poor performance in college became a barrier to being accepted into seminary. I had to do some remedial work to get in. My insecurities created tension in the process. My pride often got in the way as I struggled to prove myself. I wanted so bad to show everyone I belonged. This summer I will celebrate twenty years of ordained ministry and perhaps the biggest thing I've learned as I look back is that I'm simply the chief of sinners. I am not any more or less holy than anyone else. I am no different than anyone else. I am simply one beggar called to tell other beggars where to find bread.

The very first thing that happens after the priests are ordained in Exodus 29 is a sin offering. It's a recognition that though Aaron and his sons are being set apart, they are no more holy than anyone else. No less in need of the grace of God than anyone else. They are not to stand above the people they serve as if they exist on a higher plane but rather they must be the first to confess their sins. The first to be cleansed by the blood of the sacrifice. The first to consecrate themselves to the Lord. Blood is put on the tips of their ears, the thumbs of their hands, and the big toes of their feet to remind them they are accountable for all they say and do. They have been set apart to serve God and His people. Set apart to honor God with all their lives. Set apart to give the people of Israel living, breathing examples of what it means to live a life of faithfulness before the Lord. And this is not a point of pride but one of humility. Their lives are no longer their own. Their choices are no longer their own. Their time is no longer their own. Their resources are no longer their own. All that they have is God's to use as He sees fit.

One of the questions I get asked the most is "why do you call yourself one of the pastors here at PEPC?" You never introduce yourself as senior pastor. You never allow your students to call you professor. You never use your title of "Reverend Doctor." You rarely tell people you went to Princeton. Aren't you proud of what you've accomplished? Of course I am. Don't you believe you've earned the right to such titles by your hard work? I guess I have. So why not embrace your pastoral credentials and authority? Honestly, it's because every day I am reminded of how deeply inadequate I am. Every day I am reminded of how desperately sinful I am. Every day I am reminded that I am simply a clay jar, a cracked pot, into which God has graciously chosen to deposit the treasure of the gospel. As John Newton once put it, "I am a great sinner but Christ is a great Savior." Serving Him is reward enough. I have no need for titles or accolades or trophies on a shelf. I simply want to spend my life preaching the gospel and then be forgotten.

What about you? What work has God "ordained" you to do in His Kingdom? How has He set you apart and have you humbly embraced His calling on your life?

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 33-36

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February 15, 2022

THE NAME OF THE LORD

Readings for today: Exodus 33-36

My greatest desire as a pastor is for the people I serve to come to know and love and serve Christ. It's often the first thing I think about when I wake up in the morning. It's often the last thing I think about when I go to bed in the evening. My heart breaks when I see those I love wander from the faith. My heart sings when I see those same wanderers come back home. There's nothing better than praying with someone to accept Christ. There's nothing worse than having that person later tell you they've abandoned their faith. Being given a front row seat to the spiritual growth of an individual is the greatest privilege of my life. Sitting in that same seat and watching someone slowly let their relationship with Christ grow cold is my greatest sorrow. So I can sympathize with Moses. I get the challenge he faces as a leader for God's people. And I understand his heartfelt request to see God's glory. It's often been my prayer as well.

The importance of these chapters in the Book of Exodus cannot be overstated. God is renewing His commitment to Israel. He is revealing more of Himself to His people. He gives them His name. He shares with them His divine nature and character. He makes His plan known to them. Despite their sin. Despite their rebellion. He has determined to be their God. He has determined to do something miraculous in and through them that will stun the nations of the earth. He will drive out their enemies. He will secure for them a homeland. He will do for them what has not been done for any other people. For they are set apart. Come hell or high water, they are His chosen ones. I feel the same way about the church I serve. No matter how far we fall. No matter how often we fail. God will never stop being our God and we will never stop being His people.

This is again why I love Moses' question. Sometimes leaders need their own hearts renewed. Sometimes leaders need their own doubts answered. Their own fears addressed. Their own anxieties eased. Like Moses, I often wonder if I am the right man for the job. I often wonder if I am making any difference at all in my work. I often wonder if I have what it takes to lead the church I serve into the future God has planned for her. So I find myself asking God frequently to show me His glory. Reveal to me where He is at work. Give me the eyes to see what the Spirit is doing so I can find the hope and the strength to keep leading and serving those I love.

"The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped." (Ex. 34:5-8)

From this point forward, whenever Israel is in trouble. Whenever Israel falls into sin. Whenever Israel suffers. Whenever they are oppressed and in need. They call on the "name of the Lord" and are delivered. They call on the "name of the Lord" knowing with full assurance that the Lord's name is mercy. Grace. Steadfast love. Faithfulness. They call on Him knowing He is slow to anger and keeps his steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love Him in return. They call on Him knowing He is just and will be no means give the guilty a pass. They call on Him, trusting Him to be true to Himself. True to how He revealed Himself to Moses. True to what He has declared about Himself. Over and over again, we will see these verses referenced throughout the Old Testament. Every

time the people of God call on the “name of the Lord” to be saved, they are looking back to this particular meeting where God showed Himself to Moses.

Friends, God has given us an even greater gift! He has revealed Himself to us in all His glory! In Jesus Christ, “we have seen His glory” (John 1:14) for He is the “radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature…” (Hebrews 1:3) Every time we find ourselves in trouble. Every time we fall into sin. Whenever we suffer or endure hardship or pain. Whenever we are oppressed or in need. We too can call on the “name of the Lord!” The Name that is above all other names! We too can look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith! We know He is merciful and gracious. We know He is slow to anger and full of steadfast love. We know He is just and will by no means give the guilty a pass. In fact, He dies in order to deliver all of us from the penalty of our sin! Thanks be God! Be encouraged, friends! Lift up your hearts to the Lord! Look to Him and find your hope and strength renewed today!

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February 16, 2022

Sacred, Ordinary Things

Readings for today: Exodus 37-40

When I graduated from college, I had one mission. To become a pastor. I wanted to go to seminary. I wanted to get ordained. I wanted to serve a church. God had other plans. My grades from college were terrible. I flunked out after my sophomore year due to excessive drinking. When I became a Christian, my life turned around and I re-applied and got back in under probation. Though I did pretty well my last two years, the hole I dug for myself was deep so I graduated by the skin of my teeth. The chances of me getting into grad school were slim at best. Two weeks after graduation, I got married to the love of my life and our mentors advised us to wait at least a year before going off to school. Looking back, it was great advice but it didn't feel good in the moment. It felt like yet another barrier to me doing what I felt called to do. So I got a real job. I went to work for Boulder Community Hospital. I hired on as an admissions clerk, making $7.75/hr. My wife and I rented an old, run-down apartment and did our best to make ends meet. Honestly, it was the best thing that could have happened to me. I learned the true meaning of Colossians 3:17, "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him."

When we read the Bible, it's tempting to focus on the main characters. Guys like Moses. Women like Miriam. But what about the lesser known characters? Those entrusted with the more mundane aspects of Israel's life together? What can we learn from guys like Bezalel and Oholiab? They didn't see a burning bush. They didn't hear the voice of God. They didn't go up on the mountain with Moses. They were not warriors. They were not leaders. They were not among the seventy elders Moses called. They simply were two people with God-given talent and a passion for craftsmanship. Prior to building the Tabernacle, I imagine they spent most of their days in obscurity. Building carts. Repairing tents. Making clothes. The everyday, ordinary, mundane work required to sustain God's people on their journey to the Promised Land. Amazingly, their work caught the eye of God. You may recall back in Exodus 31, God said these words, "See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft. And behold, I have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. And I have given to all able men ability, that they may make all that I have commanded you: the tent of meeting, and the ark of the testimony, and the mercy seat that is on it, and all the furnishings of the tent, the table and its utensils, and the pure lampstand with all its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the basin and its stand, and the finely worked garments, the holy garments for Aaron the priest and the garments of his sons, for their service as priests, and the anointing oil and the fragrant incense for the Holy Place. According to all that I have commanded you, they shall do." Because they had been faithful in the small things, God entrusted them with the most sacred work imaginable… building a home for God!

When I started at Boulder Community Hospital, I was per diem. I would only be called in when people were out sick or on vacation. Within a few weeks, several people in my department quit so I was asked to go full-time. Within another few weeks, the lead in my department quit and I was asked to take her position. Within six months, my manager resigned and I was asked to step into her shoes. Within a relatively short period of time, I was managing four departments and about 50 employees and I was all of 24 years old. I have no way to explain how this happened. I had no previous healthcare experience. I had never managed people before. My resume certainly didn't fit the responsibility I had been given.

The only way I can explain it is God. God filled me with His Spirit. He gave me ability and intelligence. He instilled in me through my parents a strong work ethic. He gave me a knack for working with people. And as I proved faithful in the small things like checking in patients day after day, He entrusted me with greater things like managing all of the “patient access” services.

Bezalel and Oholiab are quick to remind us that all of us have been gifted by God in some way and all of us are called to use our gifts for His glory. It’s not just pastors or missionaries who are the heroes. It is the people of God exercising the gifts God has given each of them for the upbuilding of the Body of Christ and the glory of God’s Kingdom. When we fail to exercise our gifts or diminish our gifts in any way, we lose out on at least part of what God has planned for us. Think about how impoverished we would be if there had never been a Bezalel or Oholiab? Think about the impact on the worshipping life of Israel if there were no craftsmen around to make all God had ordained? Now think about our life together. Think about our worship together. What gifts do you bring? Is it the gift of music? The gift of prayer? The gift of friendship? The gift of production? The gift of preaching? The gift of teaching? The gift of serving? If you are a Christian, you have the same Spirit of God filling you that filled Bezalel! This same Spirit imparts all the gifts and talents we need to worship and serve God as He demands. So how are you exercising your gift? How are you seeking to use your gift to build up others in your family? In your neighborhood? At work or school? In the church?

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 1-4

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February 17, 2022

Offering

Readings for today: Leviticus 1-4

One of the greatest gifts my parents ever gave me was to take me to church every Sunday. At their side, I learned to sing all the great hymns of our faith. I learned to recite the Apostle's Creed by heart. I memorized the Lord's Prayer and the liturgy of the Lord's Supper. It's funny the things you remember as a child. I remember fighting with my brothers over who got to sign in on the Fellowship Pad. (For those who don't know, the "Fellowship Pad" was a form used by a lot of churches at the time to take attendance.) I remember the tastelessness of the communion wafer and how I always wanted "seconds" when it came to the grape juice. Perhaps most of all, I remember my mom giving each of us a quarter so we could participate in the "offering" when the plate came down the pew. As a child, I have to admit I found the practice a bit confusing. Was God short of cash? Did He really need our money? Why did some people put in more and some less? Why did some not give at all? What happened to all the money? Where did it go? What did the church use it for? Why did we give when it seemed we didn't have enough for ourselves? (My family went through some very challenging economic times when I was young and yet mom always made sure to give.) Perhaps you've asked some of these same questions yourself?

Today we come to everyone's favorite book of the Bible...Leviticus. This is usually where well-intentioned Bible reading plans go to die. I often feel like I should post the warning sign Dante inscribed over the entrance to hell in his Divine Comedy, "Abandon all hope ye who enter here!" Indeed, it seems so many get lost in this book. The laws seem archaic at best. They deal with issues we have little connection with as 21st century Christians living in the wealthiest nation the world has ever seen. The cultural distance is extreme and difficult to overcome. The minutiae wears down even the most faithful reader. And yet, Leviticus is as much God's Word as the Gospels or the Pauline Epistles. The laws contained in this book are as divinely inspired as the red letters of the words of Jesus. Reading them devotionally helps shape our hearts as much as the language of the Psalms.

There are two keys principles to getting the most out of this book. First, keep in mind there are three different kinds of laws listed here. There are the ceremonial laws that governed worship. Sacrifices. Personal hygiene. Disease. Particularly focused on ritual purity, these laws were designed to create the conditions where holiness could flourish so the people could come before their Holy God without fear. Second, there are the civil laws that governed the nation of Israel. Tithing. Inheritance. Sentencing guidelines. These laws were necessary to maintain order in society, create revenue for the national government, and promote social welfare. Third, there is the moral law governing behavior. Exemplified by the Ten Commandments, these laws were designed to teach us righteousness and many of the laws governing violence, sexuality, lying, honoring parents, and Sabbath regulations were created to embed this moral law in everyday life. Taken together, the Levitical laws shaped a particular way of life for Israel that, in turn, shaped them into a particular, even peculiar, people.

For example, consider all the different "offerings" listed in the opening chapters. As you read through them, you might find yourself asking similar questions to the ones I mentioned above. Why does God need all these sacrifices? What kind of God would require such things? Is God hungry? Does He need something to eat? Is that why we offer our food back to Him? Is God vain or egotistical to demand such things? Why does God require us to impoverish ourselves on some level in order to appease Him? What point is God trying to make? The system of offerings set up by God was designed to deliver a singular message. Your life is not your own. All that you have is not yours to own or to do with as you

will. You are not an owner, you are a steward. Yes, God has entrusted you with a certain amount of talent, a certain amount of treasure, a certain amount of time, and a certain amount of responsibility. But to whom much is given, much is expected. And so He commands His people to appear before Him on a regular basis to offer back to God a portion of what He's entrusted to them so they never forget the One from whom all blessings flow.

Now fast forward a few thousand years. I am no longer a child but an adult and every week I am reminded in worship when we take an offering that my life is no longer my own. My gifts and talents are not my own. My wealth is not my own. My time is not my own. Nothing I have is mine to own. I am merely a steward and because God has given me much, He expects much. So I do my best to take what I have and offer it back to the Lord. My wife and I give significantly and sacrificially of our treasure. My wife and I give significantly and sacrificially of our time. My wife and I give significantly and sacrificially of our talent and God takes our meager offerings and multiplies them many times over for His purposes in the world.

Readings for tomorrow: 5-7

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February 18, 2022

The Big Picture

Readings for today: Leviticus 5-7

One of the biggest challenges for me when I read the Bible is to keep in mind the larger story. It's so easy for me to get stuck in the weeds especially when it comes to the laws of Leviticus or the statistics/genealogies in Numbers or the tragic stories in Judges. It's easy to lose sight of the big picture and how each of the books of the Bible ties together to illustrate a seamless whole.

The overarching narrative of the Bible takes place in four acts…

Act 1: Creation. God creating the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. Everything is good. Everything is right. Everything is beautiful. Humanity reigns and rules with God over all He has made.

Act 2: Fall. Humanity rebels and decides to go it's own way. Sin enters the world. Creation falls into ruin. Death. Disease. Pain. Suffering. All become commonplace.

Act 3: Redemption. God doesn't abandon His creation. Out of love He reaches out in rescue. Deliverance. Salvation. The culmination of His plan is Christ who defeats Sin and Death once and for all on the cross.

Act 4: Glorification. The reunion of the heavens and the earth. The joining back together of the two spheres of life that were separated by the Fall. Jesus' resurrection is the firstfruits of this reality and His promise is that He will return one day to make all things new.

It's important to note that Acts 2 and 3 are running simultaneously throughout the Scriptures. From Genesis to Revelation, we see humanity rebel over and over against God. We also see God's grace on display as He relentlessly pursues those He loves. The sacrificial system instituted by Moses in Leviticus is one movement, if you will, within Act 3. It's not the final movement. Rather, it points beyond itself to the climax to come when Jesus will become the Perfect, Spotless Lamb. This entire system with it's different sacrifices and different offerings and specific instructions is given as a means to prepare God's people for Christ. To get them ready so they will recognize Him when He appears. It's a system designed to prepare the heart and soul for the culmination of God's redemptive purposes.

By reading and reflecting on Leviticus, we are reminded over and over again of the extreme penalty our sin deserves. Death seems to reign throughout this book. You can't turn around without stumbling over the carcasses of bulls, rams, sheep, goats, and turtledoves. The sacrificial fires would have burned day and night as the people of Israel - now numbering in the hundreds of thousands - came to make their offerings. The priests must have been exhausted from all the hard work of gutting and dressing and cleaning each animal. The smell would have permeated the camp. Again, all to remind God's people of the monumental effort it took to keep them holy before their God.

This should only deepen our appreciation for Christ. Fully God. Fully Man. As God, He is fully able to satisfy the justice of God for all sin for all time. As Man, He is able to truly represent us. Take our place. Become our substitute. In Christ, Act 3 comes to its glorious close! The Father making Him who knew no sin (Christ) to become sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God! (2 Cor. 5:21) Because of what He has done, no more sacrifices are required. No more blood needs to be

shed. We are made holy just as He is holy! This is the glory of the gospel which the Levitical sacrifices foreshadow.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 8-10

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February 19, 2022

Worship

Readings for today: Leviticus 8-10

I have this vivid memory of sitting in worship when I was a young teenager, goofing off with my best friend during the Lord's Prayer. An older member of the church turned around and confronted me. She looked me in the eye. She spoke in a calm but firm voice. She was deadly serious. "You are aware, young man, that we are in the presence of Almighty God." My friend was able to blow her off. I was not. I have no other words to describe what I felt in that moment other than the "fear of the Lord." For some reason I still cannot comprehend, I received that woman's rebuke with great seriousness. To this day, whenever I pray the Lord's Prayer, I find myself returning back to that balcony seat and feel the same fear come over me. To be clear, the fear I feel is not anxiety. It's holy reverence. It's awe and wonder. It's utmost love and respect and devotion for who God is. I wish I could go back and thank that woman for the gift she gave me that day. It was one of those moments that changed the trajectory of my life.

I thought about that woman when I read about the deaths of Nadab and Abihu today. Worship for the Israelites was a dangerous proposition. Not because God is capricious or reckless or mentally unstable. But because God is holy. Pure. Dwelling eternally in unapproachable light and glory. His presence is a consuming, purifying fire. It separates gold from dross, wheat from chaff, clean from unclean by its very nature. It's a double-edged sword. Piercing to the deepest recesses of our souls and joints and marrow. Cutting away all that is rotten and septic within us. Every time we invoke His name. Every time we enter His presence. Every time we come before Him in worship, we are literally entering the Most Holy Place. And this is essentially what that older, wiser believer was challenging me on all those years ago. She wanted me to become more aware of the gulf that exists between an unholy people and a holy God. She wanted me to appreciate the character and nature of the God we worship and adore and not act flippantly or casually in His presence.

The Israelites knew all this, of course. And yet even they could become far too casual about worship. "Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord has said: 'Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.'" And Aaron held his peace." (Lev. 10:1-3) I cannot imagine watching my children die in worship. I cannot imagine watching them burn to death before the Lord. I cannot imagine the fear and anger and frustration I would feel. But then again, I have not seen God face to face. I've not had to endure His fiery presence. I've not felt the fear the Israelites experienced when they approached God in His sanctuary. Christ, thankfully, saves me from His righteous wrath. Christ, thankfully, turns aside the Father's burning anger and takes it on Himself. Christ, thankfully, satisfies all the demands of God's justice and because of His shed blood, I am made pure. I am made clean. I am made holy. Aaron and his sons had none of these benefits. They had to tread very carefully in the presence of God. They had to perform their duties with devotion and carefully do all God commanded.

We do not understand the true nature of our sin. We tend to think of sin in rational terms. Errors in judgment. Honest mistakes. Poor choices. Leviticus uses completely different categories. Sin is impure. Unclean. Unholy. It is rotten. Decaying. Festering. Decomposing. Corruption. In order to really grasp the nature of sin, we have to leave the rational behind and think in Biblical terms. The other day, my children took one of our dogs on a walk. Along the way, he found the corpse of a rabbit that had been

dead a while. He naturally grabbed it and my kids were disgusted. How many of us have been hiking in the mountains and have come upon the worm-filled, decomposing corpse of some animal and been similarly repulsed? I think of the clean up work we did in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the smell of rot and decay we had to put up with as we gutted homes and cleaned out refrigerators. It was nasty work that made us routinely gag. That, friends, is the stench of sin and it's why sacrifices had to burn continually before the Lord.

How seriously do you take your worship? How committed are you to gathering with God's people on the Lord's Day to bring Him the honor and glory He is due? When you enter into worship, do you come with an awareness that you are entering the presence of Almighty God? Entering into the Holy of Holies in heaven? When you sing the songs, pray the prayers, give your gifts, listen to the Word of God preached, and participate in the Sacraments; do you find yourself filled with reverence and awe at what God has done?

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February 21, 2022

Living Sacrifices

Readings for today: Leviticus 11-14

Confession time. I have leprosy. At least according to Leviticus 13. The leprosy referenced in our passage today isn't limited to Hansen's disease but could refer to a variety of conditions like psoriasis, scarlet fever, scabies, or atopic dermatitis. I've been fighting this last one for years. In periods of stress, my eczema flares up. I get these red patches of skin that are dry and itchy. Of course, the fact that I swim regularly doesn't help. ;-) If it's serious enough, I have to use steroid cream to get rid of it. It's not any fun and it would have potentially made me unclean back in ancient Israel. This is where Leviticus really starts to get challenging. Holy. Unholy. Clean. Unclean. Common. Polluted. The ancient Israelites assigned disease to a different category than we do today. They used lots of words we don't think about in our own context and culture. This begs for some explanation.

First, everything that is not defined as holy is understood as "common." Second, common things – like animals, plants, pots, homes, clothes, even people – are further divided into two groups which are labeled "clean" and "unclean." It's important to note here that "cleanness" is a state of being more than anything else. Clean things hold the potential to become holy things when they are sanctified. Unclean things cannot be sanctified and therefore cannot become holy. For example, if I come to present a lamb from my flock as an offering, it must be unblemished. It must not be diseased or old or disabled in some way. Blemished lambs are considered unclean, cannot be sanctified, and therefore are not suitable to offer as a sacrifice. The flip side is also true. Clean things can become unclean if they are polluted by touching something dead for example. Holy things can become defiled in the same manner which is why the proper rituals must be followed to the letter during the daily sacrifices.

But what about people, you ask? Great question! The baseline condition for humanity is "common" but the baseline condition for the people of Israel was "clean." They were set apart by God remember? Israel can become "unclean" through sin, disease, corruption, pollution, etc. Israel can also become holy by following the law of God and offering the right sacrifices. In fact, it was God's stated goal for His people to be holy even as He is holy. "For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy."(Lev. 11:44-45)

Now here's the great news! In Christ, all of the ceremonial laws that sanctified God's people have been fulfilled. He is the perfect, "once for all" sacrifice. He is the unblemished Lamb offered on our behalf. His death atoned not just for our sins but for the sins of the entire world. (1 John 2:2) As a result, our baseline condition is no longer "common." It's no longer even "clean." It's holy. Pure. As such, we no longer need to worry about clean and unclean animals. We no longer need to fear being made unclean by disease or disability or coming into contact with the dead. Through His shed blood, Christ has not only washed us clean – in the Levitical sense – but sanctified us permanently!

So does this mean we no longer need to follow the law? Not at all. The call to personal holiness has not been set aside. God still calls us as His people to be set apart in thought, word, and deed. We are still called to "be holy as He is holy" and offer our lives as "living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God" according to Romans 12. Though the ceremonial obligations of the law have been fulfilled, the moral obligations remain in force. God still has expectations for His people. Sin is still serious and should not be treated casually. This is why Jesus spends a great deal of time talking about the heart in the Sermon

on the Mount and Paul spends a great deal of time on the ethical obligations of Christians in most of his letters. As Christians, we no longer need to undergo elaborate rituals to maintain a state of cleanliness or sanctification before the Lord but we should undergo regular examination and confession of our sin in light of the Word of God.

This is one of the reasons Christians have historically engaged in spiritual practices like the Daily Examen. First pioneered by Igatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, it is an intentional way to reflect on our day. We prayerfully ask God to reveal to us what in our day drew us closer to Him and what drew us away from Him. We think back on the actions, thoughts, and feelings we experienced during the day and we consciously “examen” them in light of the Word of God. We confess where our actions/thoughts/feelings fell short and we rejoice where our actions/thoughts/feelings reflected Christ. This is just one example of learning how to bring every thought captive to Christ and live for Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 15-18

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February 22, 2022

Sexual Purity

Readings for today: Leviticus 15-18

I remember seeing my first Playboy magazine when I was ten or eleven years old. I was with my cousins. They had a stack hidden in the play-set behind their house. As a young man just entering puberty, it created all kinds of feelings inside me that I had never felt before. Powerful emotions swept over me. Sexual urges I had no idea existed welled up inside. It became an addiction that plagued me through my college years. It also created all kinds of confusion. Subconsciously, I began to objectify women. Value them primarily as objects of sexual desire. Relationships became transactional and heavily tilted towards self-gratification. If my sexual needs were not met, I moved on. Sadly, my experience was not unique. It was very common in the circles I ran in at the time. For example, I remember serving as a camp counselor at a summer residential sports camp in Maine. The hookup culture was rampant as we spent weeks getting drunk at the local bar and sleeping with each other. It was the darkest summer of my life. Thankfully, things often are darkest before the dawn and the Lord intervened in my life in a miraculous way the following year at CU. From the moment I met Christ, I knew things had to change. I had to surrender my sexuality to Him just like every other part of my life.

Today's reading includes a very important section on sexual purity. These regulations may sound somewhat foreign and somewhat familiar depending on your experience. Incest, bestiality, adultery, and homosexuality are all considered "abominations" before the Lord. Engaging in such activity comes with a heavy price. One would be cut off from his or her people. "Vomited" out of the Promised Land.

We struggle to understand this section of Scripture. Some dismiss it as "ceremonial law" much like the restrictions on what we can eat or wear. The problem with that approach is that we affirm such things as bestiality and incest as abhorrent, illegal practices in our own time. Some argue these passages are culturally bound. Their argument is that these regulations were designed exclusively for ancient Israel and therefore have no bearing on how we regulate our sexual activity today. Proponents of this argument believe in the primacy of love. As long as two people love one another, denying them sexual fulfillment is perceived as cruel and harsh. Therefore, same-sex relationships are justified as is adultery in some instances. The problem with this approach is that it misunderstands the nature of love. It trades on the erotic almost exclusively and dismisses any notion that sexuality and holiness are inextricably linked. A final argument is made - particularly from our LGBTQ Christian friends - that the authors of Leviticus didn't understand the nature of same-sex attraction and had no experience with loving, committed, monogamous same-sex relationships. Same-sex relationships in the ancient world were always exploitative, oppressive, violent, etc. and therefore the prohibitions in Leviticus 18 do not apply to a 21st century context. The problem with this approach is it is simply not historically accurate. Pioneers in Queer Studies like Louis Crompton and New Testament scholars like William Loader (neither of whom are Evangelical Christians and both of whom affirm same-sex relationships) are among many who have demonstrated that loving, non-exploitative, same-sex relationships have existed since antiquity. No matter how you slice it, the Bible is clear. God seems univocal in His condemnation of any sexual expression outside of marriage between a man and a woman and to claim otherwise is not being honest.

So what's the big deal about sex? Is God a prude? Is He simply trying to squash our natural desires and affections? We can't help how we feel, right? The key is to remember the context. You and I are born in sin. Sin warps and corrupts every part of us, including our sexual desires. Therefore, we are "naturally" going to want to rebel against God's will. We are "naturally" going to want to pursue unholiness. Our

hearts are drawn so easily away from God and towards what is impure and unclean and this is what prevents us from entering God's presence. And yet God wants to dwell with us! God wants to be with us! So God commands us to "be holy as He is holy" and this call covers every area of our lives, including our sexuality. Sexuality is not an end in itself. It is a powerful drive created by God for the main purpose of the propagation of our species as well as to give physical expression to the kind of "oneness" God desires men and women to have in this life. The joining together of man and woman in sexual intimacy within the context of the covenant of marriage is literally designed to give us a foretaste of the joy and freedom and transparency we will enjoy with one another in the Kingdom of Heaven. This is why sex can be so amazing! And it is also why God has placed such strong boundaries around it's expression. To keep us safe. To keep our sexual lives pure and free from corruption so we can experience all God has for us.

All one has to do is look around our culture today to see the consequences of unfettered sexual desire. Sexually transmitted disease. Sexual abuse and assault. The objectification of the female and male bodies. Rampant divorce and infidelity. The breakdown of families. Depression and anxiety and fear surrounding every potential sexual encounter and/or its aftermath. It's heartbreaking. God's desire is for us to repent and commit ourselves to holiness. Holy sexuality is expressed in celibacy in singleness and intimacy in marriage between a man and a woman. I realize taking a traditional, Biblical position on sexuality in our world today will draw scorn and even accusations of bigotry. However, I believe when one takes a step back and looks objectively at the empirical data surrounding the consequences of pursuing a sexual ethic divorced from the Bible, one can easily conclude God probably knows better. After twenty-six years of faithful marriage to one woman, I certainly know this to be true in my own life.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 19-22

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February 23, 2022

The Golden Rule

Readings for today: Leviticus 19-22

Raise your hand if you knew the Golden Rule came from Leviticus? Now repent because you broke the 8th Commandment! :-) Most associate the Golden Rule with Jesus and rightfully so. After all, Jesus repeats it as part of His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. (Matthew 7:12) However, very few people realize that God first enshrined this rule in law in Leviticus. Lost in all the conversation about sacrifices and priestly garments and what one should eat or wear is this beautiful picture of community life in Leviticus 19:9-18.

We see God's heart for the poor and less fortunate..."When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God."

We see God's concern for honesty and transparency..."You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord."

We see God's compassion, especially for the less abled in our midst..."You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord."

We see God's desire for justice and righteousness and truth..."You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the Lord."

And finally, we see God's admonition against hate, anger, rage, contempt, and most of all, vengeance..."You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."

This are massively applicable in our world today! Could you imagine a community of people who sought to put these into practice? On a daily basis? Who gave generously? Dealt honestly? Showed compassion? Fought for truth? Laid aside anger and rage and malice and hate in the name of love? Hopefully you can. It's called the church! Now I know no church is perfect. After all, it's full of imperfect sinners like me who struggle to keep God's law faithfully. However, as we seek God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, we can expect to see some of these same behaviors break loose in our lives! We can expect to bear this kind of fruit for the Kingdom. And as brothers and sisters called into community together, we can make a HUGE difference in the world today. That's the call. That's the challenge. That was God's plan for Israel and it's still God's plan for His people today!

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 23-25

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February 24, 2022

Sabbath

Readings for today: Leviticus 23-25

Sabbath. It is a core, foundational principle in Scripture. Hardwired into our system at creation so that we could find rest. One day out of every seven. One year out of every seven. One year out of every fifty set aside for rest. Set aside to honor God. Set aside for not only our rest but that of the land. Animals. Basically, all of creation. A pattern God Himself followed at creation. Six days God labored to make the universe and all that is in it and on the seventh day He rested.

We ignore this command at our peril. Not just because God commands it. This is no arbitrary rule God puts in place to test us. It's not divine busy work just to make sure we are listening. No. God has hardwired the human body for rest. Our best medical professionals will tell you the source of so much of the depression, anxiety, fear, and pain we suffer from is due to the stress of feeling like we have to work 24/7. We are being crushed under the weight of the burdens we carry. The responsibilities. The obligations we've taken on as a family and as individuals in our world. Social media only exacerbates this problem with it's never-ending stream of connection. The reality is we were not built to be "on" all the time. 100% productivity is a goal that will kill us even if we are able to achieve it.

I remember seeing this play out when I worked as the Manager of Patient Access Services at Boulder Community Hospital. The stated goal of the Human Resources department was to get maximum productivity from each employee. They actually had an equation they followed to determine how much each employee was expected to produce. They kept our available workforce as lean as possible in order to achieve this goal. The result was a much higher number of sick days, lower quality of life in the workplace, and therefore, lower productivity. In their effort to achieve maximum efficiency, they lost sight of the very real human cost.

That was almost thirty years ago. Things have not gotten better. As a pastor, I watch as people try to squeeze 28 hours worth of work into a 24 hour time period. I see them running from dawn to dark, giving themselves barely any space to breathe. The result is broken marriages. Broken families. Broken lives. The Sabbath is designed to create a "speed bump" in our lives. To get us to slow down. To rest. To let God be God. It is perhaps the most tangible expression of our faith because it forces us to relinquish control over our lives. When I Sabbath, I am letting God back onto the throne of my life because I am specifically choosing NOT to produce anything. And that's a good thing. Even a godly thing. A major reason Israel lost the blessing of God was their failure to keep the Sabbath. We actually don't have any evidence they let the land rest every seven years. We certainly have no evidence they honored the Year of Jubilee. When you read the passages from today, it's important to sit back and ponder what life would look like if we really lived according to God's divine rhythm.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 26-27, Numbers 1-2

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February 25, 2022

The Glory of God's Law

Readings for today: Leviticus 26-27, Numbers 1-2

Wow. Congratulations! You've just finished Leviticus! It is a significant accomplishment to make your way through one of the hardest books of the Bible. But you persevered. You pushed through. Even if you find yourself a little behind, you are going to make it! Well done! ;-)

One big question that a lot of people are afraid to ask about Leviticus is this...what is the purpose behind all these laws? Or big picture, what is the purpose behind God's Law? The late, great R.C. Sproul described it this way...

"The first purpose of the law is to be a mirror. On the one hand, the law of God reflects and mirrors the perfect righteousness of God. The law tells us much about who God is. But perhaps more important, the law illuminates human sinfulness. As Augustine once wrote, "The law orders, that we, after attempting to do what is ordered, and so feeling our weakness under the law, may learn to implore the help of grace.'" In other words, the Law of God highlights our innate weakness so that we might seek the strength found in Christ.

"A second purpose for the law is to restrain evil. The law, in and of itself, cannot change human hearts. It can, however, serve to protect the righteous from the unrighteous. John Calvin put it this way, "The Law, by means of its fearful denunciations and the consequent dread of punishment, curbs those who, unless forced, have no regard for rectitude and justice." The law allows for a limited measure of justice on this earth, until the last judgment is realized."

"The third purpose of the law is to reveal what is pleasing to God. As born-again children of God, the law enlightens us as to what is pleasing to our Father, whom we seek to serve. The Christian delights in the law as God Himself delights in it. Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). This is the highest function of the law, to serve as an instrument for the people of God to give Him honor and glory."

We see these three purposes at work in Leviticus 26. In verses 1-13, God clearly lays out the blessings of obedience. If God's people will live in a way that is pleasing to God, they will bring Him honor and glory. God will dwell with them and walk with them and they will be blessed. This is the third purpose of the Law. Then, in verses 14-39, God clearly lays out what will happen if God's people don't follow His Law. God Himself will become their adversary. He will fight against them. He will walk contrary to them in wrath and fury. He will punish them. They will suffer. This is the second purpose of the Law which is to restrain human evil. Finally, in verses 40-46, we see the first purpose of the law come into play. Repentance. The reality is God's people will not be able to fulfill God's Holy Law and this is by divine design. It's to teach us that righteousness and holiness are beyond us. It's to bring us to our knees in what I call "holy despair." It's to drive us to the end of ourselves, our strength, our ability, our self-sufficiency. It's to bring us to a place where we cry out to God for mercy and grace! We look to Christ to take our place! We glorify Christ for doing what we could not! We surrender to Christ and exchange His righteousness for our own. It's a beautiful exchange!

So here's the most important question as you finish Leviticus...do you find yourself resenting the Law of God? Dismissing the Law of God? Or do you find yourself overwhelmed by a deep sense of inadequacy before the Lord? If it's the former, I would encourage you to go to prayer and ask God to

soften your heart towards Him. If it’s the latter, be encouraged that you are drawing ever closer to Christ and He stands ready to take your place!

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 3-5

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February 26, 2022

God's Treasured Possession

Readings for today: Numbers 3-5

The title for this particular book of the Bible could not be more appropriate. The Book of Numbers is indeed "all about the numbers!" The number of warriors in Israel. The layout of the camp of Israel. The duties of the Levites. Even more specifically, the duties of Kohathites, Gershonites, and Merarites. And then some more regulations regarding ritual purity, confession and repentance, and then a strange test for adultery. As was the case in Leviticus, the cultural distance between us and ancient Israel is vast so we have to take a step back and look at the big picture.

"Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel. The Levites shall be mine, for all the firstborn are mine. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both of man and of beast. They shall be mine: I am the Lord." (Num. 3:12-13)

Israel belonged to God. They were His chosen possession out of all the nations of the earth. He had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt and thereby laid claim to their very lives. They were not their own. They were not "free" to choose or not choose God. He had chosen them. He had saved them. He had rescued them. He had made His covenant with them. No matter where they went or what they did or how they acted, they remained His children forever. In order to remind them of this great and awesome truth, God told Moses to set aside one entire tribe...the Levites. They would not be counted in the census. They would not be considered "part" of Israel. They would have no inheritance in the Promised Land. Their "inheritance" would be God Himself. They would be set aside to serve Him in His Tabernacle and, later, His Temple. They would play specific roles within the worshipping life of Israel. They would guard the sanctuary. They would set it up, tear it down, and transport it day after day. From birth they were set apart, consecrated to the Lord's service. It was not a vocation they chose but a calling God had placed on their lives.

Fast forward a few thousand years. One greater than Moses is born. A high priest greater than Aaron has come. The Old Covenant is fulfilled. The New Covenant is established. "In speaking of a new covenant, Jesus makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away." (Hebrews 8:13) The reality is the Old Covenant was always temporal. Always bound to a particular cultural situation. Always designed to point us to a new and better covenant which Jesus Himself would die and rise to guarantee. "This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant." (Hebrews 7:22) The ceremonial laws of Israel were culturally bound to a particular time and place. To a particular situation in history. Even the moral law which remains binding serves only to show us our weakness and imperfections. Therefore, it is useless to save. "For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God." (Hebrews 7:18-19) Jesus is that better hope! And through His life, death, and resurrection, God once again lays claim to our lives. He chooses us. He redeems us. He purchases us with His own blood. And because He Himself is our eternal high priest, interceding for us continually in the heavens. Because He Himself is our eternal sacrifice, fully atoning for the weight of all our sin. "He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him..." (Hebrews 7:25)

In Christ, we belong to God. We are His treasured possession. We are His chosen people. As such, we are not our own. Our lives are not our own. Our future is not our own. All that we have and all that we

are and all that we achieve is not ours to hold onto but rather ours to offer in service to God. How different would our lives be if we understood this great truth?

Readings for tomorrow: None

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February 28, 2022

Spiritual Unity

Readings for today: Numbers 6-9

What is it that brings people together? I have long pondered this question. I have been in settings where individuals from wildly different backgrounds almost miraculously find common ground. A maximum security prison where men who once belonged to rival gangs defined by racial hatred play side by side in a worship band. An African nation where one tribe attempted to exterminate the other find healing and reconciliation as they practice confession and forgiveness. A husband and wife, estranged for many years because of deep wounds, renew their vows and discover new intimacy as they humble themselves and make themselves vulnerable before each other. Sadly, I've seen the other side as well. Especially recently. Debates over COVID mandates. Political power struggles. Social strife. All have conspired to exacerbate our differences and tear us apart. None of these things are new. In fact, they are quite normal. Status quo for the human race. Throughout our history, we have demonstrated an almost limitless capacity for division. It's part and parcel of our fallen nature.

Perhaps that's why I love our reading today. Especially chapter seven. Yes, I know it's full of mind-numbing details like the weight of several silver plates, the number of gold dishes, and what seems like a herd of livestock but when one takes a step back to look at the big picture, what emerges is a beautiful picture of unity. Each of the twelve tribes of Israel coming before the Lord to make a sacrificial offering. Each of the twelve tribes doing their part to help consecrate the altar. Each of the twelve tribes sending their most respected leader to dedicate the best of what they have to God. It's a beautiful picture of what God's people can do when they come together with one heart and mind. And what happens? God honors their spiritual unity. He accepts their sacrifice. He descends from heaven to meet with them. "And when Moses went into the tent of meeting to speak with the Lord, he heard the voice speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the testimony, from between the two cherubim; and it spoke to him." (Numbers 7:89)

What is it that drives such unity? Is it unanimity? I don't think so. The Book of Numbers is replete with story after story of rebellion and conflict and complaint. The people of God often find themselves at odds with each other, with Moses, and with God Himself. Is it because they are ethnically and culturally homogeneous? Not at all. Their identity as God's chosen people is still in it's infancy. They are far more shaped by their experience of slavery and often exhibit a desire to return. They have yet to settle in the Promised Land. They have yet to establish themselves as a nation. So what is it? What is it that brings them together and motivates them to give so generously? The only answer is God. His faithfulness keeps them together when so many forces threaten to tear them apart. His steadfast, covenant love gives them a common identity and purpose. His holiness exposes all their impurities and His mercies – new every morning – cleanse them daily of their sin.

Now fast forward to our context. What is it that drives unity in our community? Is it our unanimity? Not at all. We are divided generationally, economically, ethnically, politically, culturally, socially, sexually, you name it. There are so many forces arrayed against us threatening to tear us apart. In my experience, the people of God are just as rebellious and prone to conflict and complaint as the people of Israel! Including me, by the way! So what is it that brings us together? The only answer is Jesus. He is the author and perfecter of our faith. Through His death and resurrection, He tears down every dividing wall of hostility that exists between us. He is faithful even when we are faithless. His unconditional love and grace shapes our identity and gives us purpose. His holiness exposes our sin and His shed blood cleanses us completely and utterly and for all eternity.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 10-13, Psalm 90

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March 1, 2022

Humble Leadership

Readings for today: Numbers 10-13, Psalm 90

There seems to be a yearning in the human heart for deep connection. To God. To other human beings. There is a real craving in the world today for authenticity. A desire to "be real" and be known. I hear it all the time and I feel it down in my bones as well. The problem, of course, is most folks don't really want to engage on an authentic level because it's not very pretty when we do! We run into all kinds of sin and ugliness and we're not very good at accepting each other's faults. We aren't very good at showing each other grace. We aren't very good at forgiveness and reconciliation because such things take a lot of work. So we settle. We settle for less in our human relationships. We settle for not being known. Not being understood. Not being connected. And worst of all, we settle in our relationship with God. We only let Him in so far. We only let Him reign and rule over parts of our lives, not the whole. We only submit halfway and the result is a lot of pain and suffering and heartache.

Nothing's new under the sun. The people of God have been struggling with these things for thousands of years. It's like the struggle is hardwired into our system by the Fall. (Remember that tragic event in Genesis 3? It frames everything!) You think about the blessings Israel enjoyed. A literal pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day. God visibly present among them! God's glory filling the Tabernacle. Moses literally speaking to God on their behalf. Silver trumpets blowing every time they went forth to remind them God would be with them. The parting of the Red Sea. The deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Rescue from the plagues. Manna in the wilderness. The miracles they experienced were incredible! And still they complained! Still they struggled to believe! Still they rebelled!

"And the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, and when the Lord heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp." (Num. 11:1)

"Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, "Oh that we had meat to eat!" (Num. 11:4)

"Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. And they said, "Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the Lord heard it." (Num. 12:1-2)

"And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them." (Num. 13:33)

Leading God's people has never been easy. There is always complaining. Always whining. Always criticism. But guess what? That's real! That's authentic! That's people being themselves. And if we're honest, none of us are immune. Even Moses complains, "I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me." (Num. 11:14) So what's the answer? Humility. One of my favorite verses in all of Scripture is Numbers 12:3, "Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth." What a statement! Moses' leadership was not based on his power or eloquence or influence or wealth or talent. It was based primarily on his humility. His meekness. And because Moses considered others more important than himself, he wasn't threatened. God put His Spirit on other leaders. He wasn't threatened when God's Spirit showed up in other parts of the camp.

Reminds me of the famous quote from Harry Truman, “It’s amazing what you can accomplish if you don’t care who gets the credit.”

Humility gives us the ability to accept other people for who they are...warts and all. It gives us the ability to extend grace even in difficult circumstances. It gives us the ability to address the log in our own eye first before we go to pluck the dust out of our brother or sister’s eyes. Most importantly, it is humility that allows us to submit our lives to the Lord and to follow in His ways.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 14-16, Psalm 95

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March 2, 2022

Power of Intercession

Readings for today: Numbers 14-16, Psalm 95

Today's passage reveals two things in stark terms. If God were not faithful. If His steadfast love did not endure forever. If His grace was not extended to generation after generation. We would all be dead. We would all be destroyed. Our sin is simply too much. Our penchant for rebellion to hard to resist. Our pride too much to overcome. At the same time, God has a mission. Come hell or high water, God will make His glory known on the earth. No obstacle will stand in His way. Not even His own people! No power will prevent Him from accomplishing His great task. Not sin. Not evil. Not death. "But truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord." (Numbers 14:21)

The people of God quake in fear at the report of the spies. They mutiny against Moses and the Lord. They make plans to head back to Egypt. Back to slavery. Back to what was familiar. It reminds me of one of my favorite Proverbs, "Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly." (26:11) But for the intervention of the Lord, they would have stoned Moses to death! Incredible! So God tells Moses to step aside so He can destroy them and start all over yet again. Once again, Moses is being tested. Once again, Moses is being challenged to stand in the gap for God's people. Once again, Moses intercedes. He calls on God to remember His own name. To be true to His character. It's an amazing prayer and worth reading again.

"But Moses said to the Lord, "Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for you brought up this people in your might from among them, and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O Lord, are in the midst of this people. For you, O Lord, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go before them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard your fame will say, 'It is because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give to them that he has killed them in the wilderness.' And now, please let the power of the Lord be great as you have promised, saying, 'The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation.' Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now." (Numbers 14:13-19)

Some might see this as Moses talking God down. Talking God off the ledge. Persuading Him to change His mind. This is where the true nature of intercessory prayer comes in. Intercessory prayer actually creates a new condition, a new situation to which God responds. Whereas the sin of the people of God created one situation to which God responds righteously in judgment; Moses' intercession creates a second situation to which God responds righteously in mercy. If Moses refused to intercede, God's people would have perished. God would have followed through on His threat and His punishment would be just. However, Moses did stand in the gap. He fell on His face before the Lord and asked God to forgive and pardon – not because the people of God deserve it – but for the sake of His own reputation and great name.

So often we are tempted to believe prayer is worthless. After all, God already knows what He will do, right? God already knows the outcome so why pray at all? Friends, this is part and parcel of what it means to be in a real, authentic relationship with God. He invites us to intercede. He invite us to lift up the needs of those we love. He invites us to stand in the gap for our friends and neighbors and community and world. And as we do, He promises to respond in accordance with His divine nature and

character and will. Does this mean we will always get the outcome we desire? No. Like any good Father, God keeps the bigger picture in mind. He sees what's happening on a universal, global scale and we have to trust He knows what is best. But this does not mean our prayers are any less powerful or effective. Let me encourage you to accept God's invitation to intercede on behalf of others. Don't be afraid to boldly ask God to act on their behalf. Call on God to intervene in accordance with His divine will and nature and then trust Him with the results.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 17-20

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March 3, 2022

Pointing People to Jesus

Readings for today: Numbers 17-20

As a pastor, I do a lot of counseling. One of the most common issues I face is something called “blame shifting.” Basically, a person commits a wrong and when confronted on it, “shifts” the blame to someone else. This can be their spouse. Their children. Their parents. Their boss. Even their pastor! :-) I cannot tell you the number of times I have counseled a couple on their marriage only to have them blame me for their eventual separation and divorce. Never-mind the fact they were unwilling to put in the work. Unwilling to change any of their unhealthy behaviors. Unwilling to engage each other at a different level. At the end of the day, because the counseling didn’t “work”, it must be my failure as a pastor.

We see this same dynamic in play in Moses’ relationship with Israel. How many times do they accuse Moses of failing to lead them well? How many times do they blame him for not providing water, food, or getting them to the Promised Land? Never-mind their own sin. Their own lack of faith. Their own fear. Their worship of false gods. “And the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord! Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink." (Num. 20:3-5) Over and over again, we hear this refrain. Let’s go back to Egypt. Let’s go back to slavery. You brought us out here to die. The accusations are unjust. The attacks are personal. And Moses must have been hurt so he responds the way any of us would…he reacts in anger.

“Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock? And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock.” (Numbers 20:10-11) Makes perfect sense to me. I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve felt exactly the same way. It’s incredibly frustrating to be falsely accused. It’s hurtful to have your motives questioned or your character attacked. It makes me angry when people lie about me or say all manner of things about me that just are not true. How many times have I wanted to lash out over the years? How many times have I lashed out only to later regret it?

God will not be mocked. He will not allow us to get in the way of His own glory. By lashing out in anger and striking the rock twice, Moses was more focused on himself than on God. The people would now be tempted to be more afraid of Moses than of the Lord. So the Lord issues His judgment. “Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.” No one is above God’s law, not you. Not me. Not even Moses. All of us are responsible to “uphold God as holy” in the eyes of those we live with and live among. All of us are responsible to point people to Jesus no matter how hurt or betrayed or angry we may feel. And the only way we can ever do this with any kind of integrity is if we swallow our pride and humble ourselves before the Lord.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 21-24

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March 4, 2022

The Language God Speaks

Readings for today: Numbers 21-24

When I first became a Christian, I started eating at this little pit BBQ place off Arapahoe in Boulder, CO. It was owned and operated by an amazing man named Bruce. Bruce was the son of the famous "Daddy Bruce" who served the homeless of Denver for many years, making sure they got a full Thanksgiving dinner. Bruce Jr. was cut from the same cloth as his father. He not only served the homeless of Boulder, he also was a strong believer in Jesus Christ. I don't know that I've ever met someone quite like him. He literally could quote you chapter and verse from the whole Bible. He would quiz me every time I came in before he would make me any food. He would tell the best stories about how God had worked in his life. One day, he was sharing with me his frustrations with how biblically illiterate American Christians tend to be. He was a black Baptist preacher and could preach with the best of them. I still remember the crescendo of his sermon that day. "Doug, when I'm in need don't you give me no Footprints in the Sand! I don't need no Prayer of Serenity! Tell me about the donkey that spoke! Now that's in the Bible!" I still chuckle every time I think of it!

Today we read a crazy story about a fortune-teller named Balaam and his donkey. Israel is moving towards the Promised Land. God is going to fulfill His promise to Abraham. But it won't be easy. The land is already occupied. There are forces arrayed against them all along the way. Nations and tribes and cities whom they will have to fight in order to claim God's promise as their own. Arad. Amorites. Bashan. All fall before Israel. All are put to the sword. Devoted to destruction. And now it's Moab's turn. (If you remember, the Moabites are descendants from Lot who was Abraham's nephew. His oldest daughter got him drunk and slept with him in order to get pregnant so these are distant cousins of Israel.) One can almost imagine living in those days. Getting word of a new superpower rising from slavery. Defeating the Egyptians. Overrunning all who oppose them. Fear and trembling seize the Moabites. So Balak, their king, sends for Balaam. His hope is that Balaam will use his magic to put a curse on Israel, thus weakening them so they can be defeated. But Balaam is visited by God. God commands Balaam not to go with the princes of Moab. However, Balaam eventually relents before the pressure Balak brings to bear. He mounts his donkey and begins his journey. It's not long before the donkey freezes in its tracks. It can see the angel of the Lord blocking their path. Balaam, in his blindness, is both physically and spiritually unaware. God opens the mouth of the donkey (insert your favorite Shrek scene) and speaks to Balaam. The net result of it all is that Balaam will indeed go to Balak but will only speak blessings over Israel.

So what are we to make of such stories? Magic? Fortune-telling? Donkeys that speak? The point here is that God speaks to us in a language we can understand. He meets us in the middle of our cultural superstitions. He uses all things - even our delusions - to bring about His perfect will. Remember when Jacob peeled poplar and almond trees in order to breed a specific kind of goat and sheep in Genesis? Does anyone actually believe the power was in the trees? Or was it God using Jacob's foolishness to accomplish His purposes? What about the bronze serpent on the pole? Is it really the talisman that saved Israel from the poisonous snakes that were killing them? Or was it God using their superstitions to deliver them? Think about the myths we so easily believe today. The "invisible hand" of Adam Smith from his famous book, Wealth of Nations. The myth of universal human rights in a world where every tribe and nation seems to place a different value on life. The notion that democracy is transcultural and can be universally applied in the same way we apply it here in America. (A mistake that cost us dearly in Afghanistan and Iraq...) The reality is we too believe in magic. We too believe in

myths. They may be couched in more sophisticated language and political or economic theory but they are fairy tales nonetheless.

So what's a Christian to do? We have to push past our superstitions and look to God. We have to push past the "bronze serpents" we create and stop looking to "fortune-tellers" to show us the way. We have to dig deep into God's Word. We must fix our eyes on Jesus! He is our only hope! He is greater than any bronze serpent! He is wiser than any Balaam! He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life!

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 25-28

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March 5, 2022

Succession Planning

Readings for today: Numbers 25-28

For years, I've harbored this dream of retiring as the church janitor. No big send off. No celebratory retirement dinner. No special recognition. Just a long, slow fade into the background. I hope with all my heart it happens and I'm actually making plans towards that end. Yes, I am still very much in my prime years of leadership. But time goes by fast and before you know it, I will come to the end. My preaching gifts will wane. My vision for the future will begin to fail. My influence will fade as it rightly should and when that happens, I must be humbly willing to take a step back. Let another take my place.

This is one of the things I love most about Moses. He knows he's coming to the end. The closer they get to the Promised Land, the closer they get to end of his life and leadership because God has already told him he will not be allowed to cross over. So when they arrive at Mt. Abarim, God calls Moses to go up and see the land He has given to Israel. It will be the last thing Moses will see before his death. He will at that time be "gathered to his people" just like his brother Aaron. However, Moses loves his people. He doesn't want them left without a leader so he asks God to appoint his successor. To raise up a man to take his place. And once again, God answers Moses' prayer. He raises up Joshua and he is commissioned as Moses' successor in front of all the people.

There are several things to learn from this passage about succession planning. First and foremost, none of us is irreplaceable. The Kingdom of God is much bigger than any one person. Second, we must humbly accept the fact that we will eventually decrease and another will increase. We will eventually fall and another rise to take our place. This is natural and good and right. Third, we should be preparing with this end in mind. Not holding too tightly to our position or power but rather plan for the day when we need to step aside. Fourth, we should be praying for God to raise up our successor. We should be praying for the man or woman whom God is calling to take our place.

As I said, I want to retire as the church janitor and I am already planning with that end in mind. Should the Lord be gracious to me, I might have another fifteen years in my current position. At that point, I need to relinquish my role as senior pastor and move into an associate role. I need to fade into the background and let another take my place. I need to humble myself under their leadership. Serve as their chief cheerleader. Do all I can to help them be successful. Then I need to fade even further. From ordained pastor to an ordinary staff position. Doing all I can to give my life in service to others. Decreasing as much as possible so others increase around me. Finally, after my physical and spiritual and emotional strength is spent, I can be "gathered to my people" and hear the words I long to hear from Jesus, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Readings for tomorrow: None

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March 7, 2022

God's Judgment

Readings for today: Numbers 29-32

Holy War. Jihad. Violence sanctioned by God Himself. In Numbers 31, God directs Moses and Israel to attack Midian. "Avenge the people of Israel on the Midianites. Afterward you shall be gathered to your people." Who was Midian and what had they done to Israel to cause God's judgment to fall on them in such an extreme fashion?

Midian was a son of Abraham and his servant Keturah. While Abraham was still living, he sent Midian away so that there would be no competition for Isaac's inheritance. Midian presumably thrived over the years becoming a great tribal nation. Abraham's great-grandson Joseph was sold to Midianite traders as they made their way to Egypt. Moses fled to Midian to escape Egyptian justice and actually married a Midianite woman. As Moses learned to lead the nation of Israel, he leaned on his father-in-law, a Midianite priest, for advice but Israel's close association with Midian would come back to haunt them as they began to intermarry with them and co-mingle their worship practices. This results in judgment as God pours out His wrath on Israel through a plague which is only stopped when Phinehas kills Cozbi, daughter of a Midianite chief named Zur, and her husband Zimri who was the son of a Simeonite chief. Furthermore, the Midianites had allied themselves with the Moabites, setting themselves in opposition to Israel, and called on one of their prophets - Balaam - to come and curse the people of God.

You may remember the 2nd Commandment. "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me," (Exodus 20:4-5) God is jealous for His divine name. Jealous for His divine glory. Jealous for His relationship with His people. He makes it clear over and over again throughout the Scriptures that He will tolerate no rivals. So when Israel begins to worship the Midianite gods, God takes action. First, he punishes Israel as I mentioned above. Then He calls for holy war. He commands His people to attack Midian and "execute the Lord's vengeance." Vengeance not in the sense of God losing control and lashing out but vengeance in the sense of the righteous execution of God's justice. Israel is successful. They kill all the males that come against them. They take the women and children hostage. They plunder their possessions. Then they go one step further. As an act of ritual purity, they kill all the male children and any women who is not a virgin. It is brutal. It is horrifying. It is judgment. The women were just as guilty as the Israelite men in the sin of idolatry at Peor and their guilt conveys to their male children as well who - if left alive - might seek their own revenge against Israel in the future. Once again, we have to remember how different ancient near east culture was when compared to our own. Blood feuds between tribes and clans were common and could last generations.

This is scary stuff. Especially for the 21st century American reader. It doesn't square with our notions of a loving God who always shows mercy and grace to the sinner. When we read passages like this, we think of modern-day terrorists. Suicide bombers. Religious extremists like ISIS and we cannot understand how our God could ever act in such ways. This is where we come face to face with God's holiness. God's righteousness. God's justice. The stark reality is this...evil makes God angry. Idolatry is an offense. He does not let it go. He does not overlook our sin. He does not turn a blind eye to our rebellion. This is why the cross itself is so brutal and horrifying. There God pours out the full measure of His righteous wrath and judgment on His Son. Satisfying the demands of divine justice through

Jesus' suffering and death. On the cross, the truly innocent One dies in our place thus saving us from God's righteous wrath and the "Lord's vengeance."

So what is our response? Repentance. Repentance is the only appropriate response of the creature when confronted by the Creator and this is the lesson we must all take away. God will not be mocked. Not back then. Not now. Not in the future. God is a God of love and mercy and grace but He is also a God of holiness and righteousness and justice. He is quick to forgive the sin of those who repent but He is also faithful to judge those who persist in their rebellion. Humble yourself before the Lord before it is too late. Embrace the Son and what He has done for you. Give your life to Christ that you might be saved from the coming judgment.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 33-36

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March 8, 2022

Death Penalty

Readings for today: Numbers 33-36

I worked for two years at New Jersey State Prison as a volunteer chaplain. NJSP is where the state of New Jersey sends the worst of the worst. Murderers. Violent criminals. Sex offenders. Gang leaders. Mafia dons. It is also where they used to house death row. I was never allowed into death row but I remember vividly standing outside the door and looking in through the window. It was a sterile environment and the men there were cut off from the general prison population. Most death row inmates are excluded from any kind of educational or employment programming and visitation is extremely limited. They can also spend up to 23 hours each day in their cells which essentially amounts to years of solitary confinement. New Jersey abolished the death penalty in 2007, five years after I left. But from 1690 to 1963, they executed 361 people.

The death penalty is a thorny subject for Christians. In theory, it does have biblical support drawn mainly from passages like the one we read today in Numbers 35. A careful reading of the passage reveals many fascinating details. Cities of refuge. Premeditated murder vs. accidental death. Avengers of blood. Congregational trials. Evidence. Witnesses. Motives. Methods. It's a very specific passage that actually places limits on vengeance in a way that would have been striking to other ancient near east cultures. It employs the principle of lex talionis or "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Proportional justice. It keeps generational vendettas from forming between families and clans and tribes.

Those who support the contemporary use of the death penalty on biblical grounds need to wrestle with the boundaries this passage sets. Provision must be made for the safety of the murderer while he/she awaits trial. Motive must be carefully discerned and the accuser is the one to carry out the sentence. If there is no premeditation then the congregation is allowed to judge and show mercy by assigning the person to a city of refuge for a certain duration. (Lifetime of the current high priest.) There must be more than one witness to the crime. And you cannot tolerate murder in the land lest it become ritually polluted.

Obviously, it's quite the challenge to apply ancient near east law codes in a 21st century context. Layer in the well-documented class issues we have in our legal system - statistically ethnic minorities and the poor are FAR more likely to be convicted and/or serve longer sentences - as well as the frequency with which our justice system convicts the wrong person (DNA evidence has been a game-changer here) and one can see why many would argue we should abolish the death penalty altogether. Furthermore, it seems Jesus accuses all of us being guilty of murder in His words from the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." (Matt. 5:21-22)

So what do we do? We must carefully and prayerfully consider our position on the death penalty. We must ask if it is just, not in abstraction but in concrete practice. We must make sure the actions we take are just, the process transparent, and if there is even a hint of incompetence or injustice in the way we prosecute then we must forbear. Furthermore, we have to come to grips with the gravity of our actions. Executing another human being is deeply significant. The shedding of blood is not something to take lightly. Unjust killing pollutes the land in which we dwell. Furthermore, to take the life of another

human being before they accept Christ as Lord and Savior consigns them to an eternity in hell. All these factors must weigh heavily on us as we wrestle with this issue and think about public policy in our society.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 1-3

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March 9, 2022

Testimony

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 1-3

Well done! You just finished Numbers and you've made it through what some would say is one of the toughest stretches in the Bible. Give yourself a high five! Now let's dig into Deuteronomy. The final book in what's known as the Torah.

The Book of Deuteronomy is a sermon. In fact, it is Moses' final sermon to God's people. His last will and testament. His final chance to encourage, challenge, confront, and comfort. He's led Israel for decades. He's led them out of Egypt. Led them through the wilderness. Led them through the ups and downs of the wilderness journey. He has personally witnessed the miracles of God. He has personally performed the miracles of God. Delivered the Ten Commandments. Issued the Law. Created an entire system of worship, governance, economics, and military organization that will long outlast him. It is a remarkable and almost unparalleled accomplishment.

Now he's at the end of his life. He's not going over the Jordan. He will not set foot in the Promised Land. He has one last chance to address the people he's led for over forty years. What would you say if you were in Moses' position? Given one last chance to address those you love or those you lead, what would be on your heart and mind? Moses points them to God. He points them to God's faithfulness. Points them to God's provision and protection. He wants them to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is with them and He is for them and He is going before them as they cross over into new territory under new leadership.

"The Lord your God who goes before you will himself fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your eyes, and in the wilderness, where you have seen how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you went until you came to this place." (Deuteronomy 1:30-31)

"For the Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He knows your going through this great wilderness. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you. You have lacked nothing." (Deuteronomy 2:7)

"This day I (the Lord) will begin to put the dread and fear of you on the peoples who are under the whole heaven, who shall hear the report of you and shall tremble and be in anguish because of you." (Deuteronomy 2:25)

"Your eyes have seen all that the Lord your God has done to these two kings. So will the Lord do to all the kingdoms into which you are crossing. You shall not fear them, for it is the Lord your God who fights for you." (Deuteronomy 3:21-22)

It's an amazing testimony and it gets me thinking…when I finish my life, how will I feel? When I look back at all I've experienced. All I've accomplished. All I set out to do. When I think about my family. My children. My future grandchildren. What will I want them to know about me? Say about me? Remember about me? Will it have anything to do with Christ? With all my heart, I hope so!

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 4-7

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March 10, 2022

The Greatest Prayer

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 4-7

Deuteronomy 6:4 contains the single most important prayer in all of Israel. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” It is the prayer known as the “Shema” (pronounced Sh’ma). Jews are required to recite this prayer twice a day. It is the first prayer they teach their children. It is the last prayer they pray before they die. It captures the essence of their monotheistic faith. Praying this prayer twice a day reminds the Jewish people of the personal relationship they have with God. They are His chosen people. They are His royal priesthood. They are His holy nation. Set apart by God Himself to declare His glory to the nations of the earth. “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations…” (Deuteronomy 7:6-9)

Because God has set His great love on them, the expectation is that Israel will love Him in return. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:5) This is the second part of the Shema. The commitment of the believer to honor God in every facet of their lives. First, we must love God with all our hearts. All our affections. All our feelings. We must love Him first above all other things. All other people. All of our accomplishments, dreams, and visions. Second, we must love Him with all our souls. From the depths of our beings. From the deepest recesses of who we are. To love God with our “soul” is to literally love Him from our bowels. From the gut. From a place deeper than our minds. Deeper than our hearts. The very core of our beings. Finally, we must love God with all our might. All our physical strength and activity should be dedicated to the glory of God. All our work. All our play. All our relationships. All our physical labor. All of it is to bring glory to God. This is what the Apostle Paul - a former Pharisee who prayed this prayer all his life - is referring to in Colossians 3:17 when he says, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

There’s a lot packed into today’s reading. So many reminders of God’s great faithfulness to His people. Despite their sin and grumbling and complaining, God remains steadfast. This is the essence of the covenant of grace God made with His people. Fast forward a few thousand years to Jesus. A lawyer challenges him one day to identify the greatest of the commandments. Jesus goes right back to the Shema. “And Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matt. 22:37-40) Not only did Jesus place the Shema at the center of His life but He demands His followers do the same.

How are you seeking to love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength? What does that practically look like in your life? If you do not know or nothing readily comes to mind, let me challenge you to memorize Matthew 22:37 and ask God to give you the wisdom to know how to place the Shema at the center of your life just like Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 8-11

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March 11, 2022

Remember

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 8-11

It is so easy for us to forget God. I think about my own life. I've experienced the miraculous provision of God. From the moment He first saved me on the campus of the University of Colorado, I have blessed far beyond what I deserve. He introduced me to incredible, life-long friends through University Christian Fellowship. Introduced me to lifelong mentors who have shaped me into the man I am today. He introduced me to my wife of almost 26 years. He guided and directed my steps professionally at Boulder Community Hospital, Princeton Theological Seminary, New Jersey State Prison, Overlook Presbyterian Church, John Knox Presbytery, and now Parker Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Along the way, I've had a front row seat to the lives He has changed. It's truly incredible. Then I think about the conversations I've had with so many fellow believers down through the years. The miracles of healing they experienced through modern medicine. Miracles of provision as God opened new doors and new opportunities. Miracles of protection from bad decisions. Miracles of deliverance from sin and death. And still we forget. Still we lose sight of all God has done. Sadly, none of this is new.

Israel also had a tendency to forget God and Moses knew it. He knew they would get into the Promised Land and begin to prosper. They would build homes and plant vineyards. They would harvest crops and raise their herds. They would conquer cities and lay claim to the territory once promised to Abraham. And in the midst of all their success, they would lose sight of God. So he warns them. "Take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end. Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth." (Deut. 8:11-17)

The reality is we have to work hard to remember. We have to incorporate spiritual rhythms into our daily lives so we do not forget. Reading God's Word and humbling ourselves before Him in prayer on a daily basis. Participating in corporate worship every week. Finding ways to serve. These are the holy habits that help us remember the most important truth of our lives...we are not our own! It is God who gives us the power to get wealth. (8:18) It is God who gives us victory over our enemies. (9:1-3) It is God alone who is righteous. God alone who is holy. To God belongs the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. And the only reason we are not destroyed along with the rest of the nations is because God made a decision in eternity to love us and set us apart for Himself. "Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day." (Deut. 10:15)

This is why we walk in the ways of the Lord. This is why we keep His commandments. By following the Law of God, we are constantly reminded of His great goodness towards us. Reminded of His great love for us. Reminded of His great faithfulness. God demands our obedience not because He needs it. Not because He's controlling or manipulative or demanding or insecure. God demands our obedience because He wants to preserve in our hearts our memory of Him. "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve

the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good.” (Deut. 10:12-13)

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 12-15

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March 12, 2022

God's Plan for Poverty

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 12-15

Poverty is a very real issue in our world today. Despite major advances in the global war on poverty - and the progress truly has been miraculous as over 1 billion people have been lifted out of extreme poverty since 1990 - the struggle remains. Furthermore, this issue is complicated by how we define "poverty." There are some objective measures defined by the World Bank and others. Extreme poverty is defined as living on less than $1.90/day. Moderate poverty is less than $3.10/day. But then there is this idea of "relative poverty" which measures the economic distance of an individual from a certain percentage of the median household income in a particular community. Our response to the problem of poverty will depend to some extent on which definition we are working from and this, in turn, will shape how we approach our interpretation of the Biblical text.

In my travels around the world, I have personally witnessed life-threatening poverty. I have seen what extreme poverty does to a person. Physical bodies wasting away from hunger. Lifeless eyes staring into the distance. Mothers begging me to take their newborn children. Men and women bombed out on khat lying in the streets. I have seen the effects of extreme drought and famine. I have seen what happens when crops fail or the rains don't come. I have seen the graves of those who've perished in the violence that often ensues when resources become scarce. And though I acknowledge the truth of Jesus' words, "you will always have the poor with you", it doesn't mean I have to like it.

Thankfully, God cares deeply for the poor. We see His tender love and care on display in our readings from today. Deuteronomy 14:28-29 contains part of the national tax code for the nation of Israel. Every year, the Israelites were expected to contribute a tithe (10%) to the Lord in sacrifices. This essentially provided income and food for the Levites since they had no property inheritance among the tribes of Israel. A second tithe was contributed to provide food and income for the Israelites themselves during those seasons when they celebrated the required feasts and were not able to work their land. In addition to these first two annual tithes, a third tithe was required every three years to provide for the poor, orphaned, widowed, foreigner, and Levites who lived in the community to make sure everyone was provided for and no one went hungry. "At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do." (Deut. 14:28-29) For those keeping score at home, this equates to an annual tax rate of 23% for each Israelite household and, in addition, they were expected to contribute freewill offerings as well.

What is the goal here? Believe it or not, it's to bring an end to poverty. "But there will be no poor among you; for the Lord will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess— if only you will strictly obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today." (Deuteronomy 15:4-5) If God's people will obey God's voice, contribute their tithes and offerings as commanded by the Law, and give generously to the foreigner, orphan and widow in their midst then the problem of "absolute poverty" disappears. However, this will be a continual process. A continual test the Lord will put before them according to Deuteronomy 15:11. "For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land."

Human society is unequal by definition. People are not all given the same gifts and talents. People are not all given the same opportunities. People are not given the same resources. Furthermore, there are forces beyond our control that make a huge impact on our economy. Natural disasters. Wars. Death. Disease. Famine. Drought. Availability of natural resources. All exact a toll. Throw in the fact that some human beings simply work harder and smarter than others and the gap between rich and poor only seems to grow.

God recognizes this very "human" trend which is why He demands generosity from His people. We who are blessed must in turn bless others. For our blessing did not come from ourselves but from God. He commands Israel to always remember their time as slaves in Egypt. To remain humble and compassionate towards those who have experienced economic hardship and therefore sold themselves into slavery to pay off their debts. When the Sabbatical Year comes (every seven years), they are to release their slaves, forgive their debts, and help them get started in their new life. "And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him." (Deut. 15:13-14) The Sabbatical Year serves almost as an economic "reset" as the wealth of the nation - which God has provided - is redistributed in a way that closes the gap between rich and poor. This effectively addresses the "relative poverty" of the country and provides hope and opportunity for those who wouldn't otherwise have it.

It's an open question how often Israel actually kept the Sabbatical Year or what practical application it could have in today's global economy. But the principle remains. If we live our lives with the understanding that all we have has been given to us by God. All our wealth. All our talent. All our opportunities. Then it becomes a lot easier to live generously. To provide for others. To sacrifice our own lifestyles so that we might relieve the burden of poverty for those around us, whether they live next door or on the other side of the globe.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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March 14, 2022

Don’t Believe the Hype!

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 16-19

God intends His people to live as beacons of life in a culture of death. This requires us to be different. Set apart. Transformed. Counter-cultural. It requires us to have our minds and hearts shaped primarily by God’s Word rather than the ways of this world. It forces us to think through what we consume on a daily basis from the media, social media, and other outlets. We have to ponder how much time we are truly spending meditating on the Word of God versus watching television or YouTube or scrolling through Facebook/Twitter/Instagram feeds.

Surprisingly, God’s people have always faced this challenge. They have always been at risk of becoming just like the pagan nations around them. The temptation is to go with the flow of the culture rather than take a stand against it. It doesn’t matter whether we are talking about Philistines, Amorites, Edomites, Greeks, Romans, Germans, Russians, Communists, Atheists, Republicans, or Democrats. The temptation remains the same. To exchange our allegiance to God for something more culturally acceptable.

This is why God commands the future kings of Israel to take out a pen and paper (or quill and scroll as it were) and literally write out for themselves every single word of the Law of God. “And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.” (Deut. 17:18-20) Their work will then be graded by the Levitical priests. Assuming the king passes, he will keep the Law with him day and night. He shall immerse himself in it. Meditating. Reading. Pondering. Praying. The goal here is not just rote memorization but something much deeper. To “learn to fear the Lord his God.”

But why is it important to fear the Lord? Because it is the beginning of wisdom according to Scripture. And we cannot live without wisdom. Not well. The other thing this daily practice of reading God’s Law will do is humble the king. It will keep him from believing he is somehow higher or better than his brothers and sisters. It will keep him from making the mistake so many of the pagan rulers made and so many of our own rulers make when they start to believe their own hype. They start reading their own press. They start to see themselves as gods, giving them the divine right to rule. We see this in our own time in places like North Korea, Russia, and China as leaders like Xi Jinping eliminate term limits. There is nothing that leads more quickly to tyranny than when a world leader starts to believe there is no authority higher than their own.

The same is true for each of us. As soon as we lose sight of the reign and rule of God over our lives. As soon as we stop reading God’s Word and stop believing what it declares about us and our sinful condition before the Lord. As soon as we start believing the cultural lie that we are our own highest authority. That we know best. That we deserve whatever we can get out of this life. We are doomed. Our lives will descend into tragedy and suffering and pain. Our most important relationships will break under the strain. We will never find fulfillment or deep satisfaction because we will have lost sight of the greater purpose for which we were created. To love and to serve Almighty God. To live under His direction and command. To pursue holiness as we seek to honor God in all we say and do.

This passage really is a call to self-examination. A courageous self-inventory must be made. Where am I struggling to submit my life to the Lord? Where am I struggling to live under His authority? Do those I am in relationship with experience me as humble? Gracious? Self-sacrificing? When I look at my schedule, where is God? When I look at my spending habits, where is God? When I evaluate my life goals, where is God? Do these things reflect His Lordship? Have I brought them under His authority? Have I truly asked Him to shape the desires of my heart?

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 20-23

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March 15, 2022

Blessings and Curses

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 20-23

Buried in all the discussion today about who gets stoned for what and when is this key passage that the Apostle Paul will pick up later in Galatians and apply to Christ. “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.” (Deut. 21:22-23) Blessings and curses are a huge theme in Deuteronomy. If you do well, you will be blessed. If you rebel against the commands of God, you are cursed. And not just you but your family, your land, your friends and neighbors because every action we take has communal consequences. This is why God is constantly telling His people to expel those who break His law lest they defile the land.

Enter the Apostle Paul. He picks up on this theme of “blessings and curses” in the Book of Galatians. He is writing to a group of largely Gentile believers who are doing their best to keep the Law of Moses. The entire book is a forceful critique that draws a sharp contrast between life under the Law and life under the Spirit. “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"— so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.” (Galatians 3:10-14) Basically, Paul argues that when we seek to justify ourselves by keeping the Law, we take on the curse because no one can actually achieve what the Law demands. Furthermore, he tags Abraham and reminds God’s people that it is not the Law that justifies in the first place but faith! Abraham believed God and was justified.

What then happens to the Law? What about the all the curses that have piled up over the centuries through the failure of God’s people to keep it? Christ literally becomes the curse for us! He literally takes our place and perfectly satisfies the Law’s just demands. And the sign of this great salvific event is the Cross. The place where Jesus literally hangs on a tree, becoming cursed on our behalf. As we know, He doesn’t hang there all night but is buried that same day in accordance with the instructions given in Deuteronomy so even in His death, He fulfills the Law.

This, in itself, is incredible news but Paul’s not done! Not only did Christ remove the curse by His saving death, He also unleashed all the blessings! All the promises God made to His people from Abraham forward are now ours in Christ Jesus! All the blessings of obedience are given to us because of Christ’s great faithfulness! This includes the very Spirit of God which is now our inheritance as adopted sons and daughters of God!

It is so easy to make the mistake of reading Deuteronomy and get crushed by the weight of expectations. We read about the blessings and curses and think immediately of our own lives and how often we fall short. We start to wonder and question our faith in God. We immediately recognize the gap that exists between who we are and who we should be. We look at the list and see all the things we should do that we don’t do and all the things we do that we shouldn’t do. An honest person knows they’ve sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. An honest person knows they have done things that bring them under the curse. Even earned them death. An honest person looks at the sin of their life and

experiences deep grief over what they have done. All that is good because it drives us to Christ! It brings us completely to the end of ourselves. The end of our pride. The end of our self-sufficiency. And it is there that Christ meets us with open arms. Hands and feet bearing the scars from where He hung on the tree. He embraces us. He lets us know all has been accomplished. The work of salvation has been finished. We are free.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 24-27

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March 16, 2022

First-Fruits

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 24-27

The principle of first-fruits is an important one in the Bible. Simply put, when we produce whatever it is we produce, we are to take the first portion. The best portion. And offer it to the Lord. Before we take care of ourselves. Before we meet our own needs. Before we pay the mortgage. Before we head to the grocery store. Before we pay the bills. Certainly before we take that vacation. Before even putting money into savings or paying off debt. We are to give unto the Lord first.

Why? Is God short of cash? Does God need our money? Isn't this just a way for churches to manipulate God's people? How do I make sure the money actually goes where God wants it? After all, I've seen celebrity pastors buy multi-million dollar homes. I've watched ministries spend all kinds of money on stuff that's not important rather than helping people. I've seen the abuse. I've seen the waste. Furthermore, I have all kinds of opinions on what my church should spend their money on. I don't agree with the way they do ministry or what they emphasize or how they operate. Why should I give them any money at all?

Those are great questions. And if we're honest, we've all probably asked them. But let's go a level deeper. Let's bring it closer to home. How are we spending our money? Are we actually any better than the church or organization we criticize? If we were to open our personal books and give ourselves an audit, what would we find? How much money did we waste last year? What extravagances did we indulge? How much did we spend on stuff that's not important rather than helping others? It's a sobering exercise, is it not? The reality is we are all corrupted by sin and our natural tendency is to hoard our wealth. To spend it primarily on ourselves. To make sure we improve our lifestyles. To make sure we get our needs taken care of. To make sure we get to live the lives we believe we deserve. And after we accomplish that then maybe we'll throw a little money God's way just to hedge our bets. We find ourselves in worship when the call for the offering comes so we take out our wallet and give God a $20. Throw Him a bone. Keep Him happy. And we walk away feeling like we at least did something.

According to research, the average Christian gives 2.5% of their income away. (For comparison, during the Great Depression, the average was 3.3%.) Average giving by adults in Protestant churches across the United States is $17/week. 37% of regular church attenders don't give at all. And the higher the income, the less likely a person is to tithe or give 10%. Only 1% of those making 75k or more tithe their income. That's the bad news. Here's the good news. About 10 million Christians give 10% or more totally $50 billion dollars a year to churches and non-profits. 77% of those who tithe actually end up giving between 11-20% of their income away. And charitable giving has continued to grow in the US though the share going to religious organizations is decreasing.

So back to the principle of first-fruits...why is it important? It serves as a reminder that everything we have comes from the Lord. Israel was descended from a wandering Aramean named Abraham. A man of no consequence other than the fact God chose Him to become the father of a mighty nation. His descendants immigrated to Egypt where they grew into a large and prosperous people until the Egyptians felt threatened and enslaved them. For hundreds of years they suffered until they cried out to the Lord for deliverance. God brought them out from Egypt with miracles and signs and wonders. He fought on their behalf. He defeated Pharaoh and his army. He provided for them in the wilderness. Fed them with manna. Quenched their thirst with water from a rock. And now He would bring them into the Promised Land. A land flowing with milk and honey. A land full of natural resources where they would

flourish. None of this was their own doing. None of this happened through Israel's strength or ability or hard work. They are not masters of their fates or captains of their souls or in charge of their own destinies. They are God's people. His treasured possession. Among all the nations of the earth. So in recognition of this special status that they did not earn...they give. They offer the first and the best of what they have to the Lord.

So what about us? Do we do the same? Do we live our lives in recognition of all God has done for us? Do we offer Him the honor He deserves? Do we thank Him for where we were born? The family we were born into? The nation in which we get to live? The talents we are naturally endowed with? The opportunities He's given us along the way? The gifts we've received that we did not earn? And do we acknowledge His sovereign grace over our lives by offering back to Him our first-fruits of time, talent, and treasure? (Notice I didn't say time, talent or treasure because we cannot substitute one for the other.) This is truly what it means to love God with all our hearts and souls.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 28-30

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March 17, 2022

Simple Life

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 28-30

Obey God and you will be blessed. Your family will flourish. You will never be defeated. Your crops will never fail. Your flocks will grow. You'll receive promotion after promotion at work. You're kids will earn college scholarships. You'll never see the inside of a hospital. You will be healthy and wealthy and prosper in all that you do. Disobey God and you will be cursed. Your family will suffer. Your enemies will be victorious. Your crops will fail. Your flocks will miscarry. You'll be terminated from your job. You're business will go under. Your kids will do drugs and never leave home much less go to college. You will be sick and poor and everything you do will turn to ash.

If only things were that simple...

Today's reading from Deuteronomy is one of the most misunderstood and even abused sections of Scripture. Heretical prosperity preachers love this part of the Bible. Especially Deuteronomy 28:12-14, "The Lord will open to you his good treasury, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands. And you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. And the Lord will make you the head and not the tail, and you shall only go up and not down, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, being careful to do them, and if you do not turn aside from any of the words that I command you today, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them." They love to tell their listeners that if they will just obey God by sending in their money - "sowing a seed" is the phrase they commonly use - God will make them the head not the tail. Their fortunes will only go up, never down. They will find healing for all their hurts. They will accumulate more possessions and earn more money than they know what to do with. All because they had faith and obeyed God.

If only things were that simple...

Sadly, life is not that simple. We all know it. We've all seen it. God's faithful often suffer. Their families struggle. The stock market crashes and takes their savings. Natural disasters strike and destroy all they own. I've seen cancer or COVID come out of nowhere and take the lives of some of the most godly people I've known. I've watched evil flourish. Look at what's happening in Ukraine right now! I've witnessed dishonest people get ahead. Horrible, manipulative, ungodly people flourish. The pandemic of the last two years has certainly brought the worst out in many folks and some of them seemed to have come out smelling like roses. I don't understand.

What does it mean to faithfully obey the voice of the Lord? (28:1) What does it mean to keep His commands and walk in His ways? (28:9) What does it mean to return to the Lord and obey His voice? (30:2) Here is what I've discovered. Following God's Law is a means to a much greater end! As always, the key is the heart. "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." (Deut. 30:6) The key is living from the "inside out" rather than from the "outside in." You and I cannot "work" our way into God's good graces. We can't "obey" our way into God's blessings. We can't "earn" our way into God's favor. That's "outside-in" thinking! The idea that if we just follow God's commands faithfully enough we will be blessed is nonsense. Life with God doesn't work that way! It's not an equation. It's not an A+B=C kind of deal. So we can't look at our life - with all it's ups

and downs - and conclude that when life is up, God and I are good. Or when life's down, God and I are on the outs. That's not how life with God works.

It's just not that simple...

What God is after is the human heart. Over and over again, He's makes this clear. Genesis. Job. Exodus. Leviticus. Numbers. Deuteronomy. The theme is consistent. God wants a family. A people with whom He will share His great love. Furthermore, He desires their love in return. Love Me with all your heart, soul, mind and strength! Return to Me with all your heart and soul! Love Me for who I AM! I AM the God who chose Abraham when he was bouncing around Ur living life as a happy pagan. I AM the God who visited your forefathers and mothers. Abraham and Sarah and Hagar. Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob and Leah and Rachel. I AM the God who delivered you from slavery in Egypt. I AM the God who guided and protected you in the wilderness. I AM the God who has brought you to the Promised Land. Yes, obey Me! Not because you have to or are forced to or because you are afraid of what might happen. Not because you'll get ahead in this world or be healthy and wealthy and live a life of luxury. No! Obey Me because you love Me and long to serve Me. This is the key! Loving God from the heart will NATURALLY lead to obedience which in turn NATURALLY leads to blessing. Don't get these confused. Don't put the cart before the horse. The goal here is not the blessings. The goal is God! God must be our supreme treasure. God must be our heart's truest and deepest desire. God must be our all in all.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 31-34

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March 18, 2022

The Song We Sing…

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 31-34

As we finish the Book of Deuteronomy, we need to pause for a moment and reflect on the life of Moses. Miraculously saved at birth. Raised in the palace of Pharaoh. Exiled for murder. Bedouin shepherd. Husband. Father. Called late in life to save Israel. Prophet. Miracle-worker. Deliverer. Spiritual and political leader of a nation of wandering ex-slaves. His life, especially the last third, was marked by his close relationship with God. Now we are at the end. Now the people stand on the borders of the Promised Land. Now he's on a mountain looking over at the fulfillment of all God has promised. Now is his last chance to share with his people all he has learned in his 120 years of walking with the Lord.

So Moses sings them a song...(Deut. 32:1-43)

"Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth. May my teaching drop as the rain, my speech distill as the dew, like gentle rain upon the tender grass, and like showers upon the herb. For I will proclaim the name of the Lord; ascribe greatness to our God! "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is He..." For Moses, everything begins with God. God's faithfulness. God's steadfast love. God's enduring grace. Without God, he is nothing. Without God, the people of Israel are nothing. Without God, they would still be slaves in Egypt. If God had abandoned them, they would have died in the wilderness. If Moses is going to sing about anything, it will be about the greatness of God! The glory of God! The majesty of God!

"They have dealt corruptly with him; they are no longer his children because they are blemished; they are a crooked and twisted generation. Do you thus repay the Lord, you foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you? Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you..." Moses also sings of the people he has served. He boldly reminds them of the truth. They are sinners. They are broken. They are rebellious. They despised God. They abandoned God. They doubted God. They disobeyed God. He sings, eyes wide open to the reality of their condition. He pulls no punches. He's not interested in sentimentality. This is his last chance to speak and he's not going to waste words on empty flattery.

"But the Lord 's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. "He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him, no foreign god was with him. He made him ride on the high places of the land, and he ate the produce of the field, and he suckled him with honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock. Curds from the herd, and milk from the flock, with fat of lambs, rams of Bashan and goats, with the very finest of the wheat— and you drank foaming wine made from the blood of the grape..." Back to God. It was God who first called Jacob. Found him in the wilderness. Loved him. Nursed him. Cared for him. Taught him how to walk. Taught him how to live. Guided him along the way. Always protecting. Always providing.

"But Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked; you grew fat, stout, and sleek; then he forsook God who made him and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation. They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods; with

abominations they provoked him to anger. They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth...” What was the response of the people? Again, rebellion. As they grew strong and prosperous, they forgot God. They started going their own way. Doing their own thing. Forgetting God. Seeking to be their own gods. They repeated the sin of Adam and Eve. They fell for the original temptation of the evil one. They gave in, wanting to live like gods themselves.

"The Lord saw it and spurned them, because of the provocation of his sons and his daughters. And he said, 'I will hide my face from them; I will see what their end will be, for they are a perverse generation, children in whom is no faithfulness...” So God judged them. Disciplined them in his wrath. He sought to purify and sanctify them through suffering. Through exile. Through wandering. Through defeat. He was faithful to remind them they held no power of their own. They had no strength of their own. All they had achieved had come via the mercies of God. He would not allow their illusions and self-deceptions to stand.

“For the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants, when he sees that their power is gone and there is none remaining, bond or free...See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand...Rejoice with him, O heavens; bow down to him, all gods, for he avenges the blood of his children and takes vengeance on his adversaries. He repays those who hate him and cleanses his people's land.” It took God forty years to bring his people to their knees. But the long years of wandering were not in vain. Now they knew God. Now they saw God. Now they understood God. They submitted. They surrendered. They repented. And they were ready to enter the land He had promised.

Friends, this isn’t just Moses’ story. It’s not just Israel’s story. It’s my story. It’s your story. And this begs a really important question...when the years grow short and your strength begins to fail and you’re surrounded by your family and those you love, what song will you sing? Will you sing of God and His great faithfulness? Will you sing of His mercies and kindness? Will you declare His glory and majesty? Will you make known His mighty works to the next generation? What song will you sing?

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 1-2, Psalm 105

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March 19, 2022

The Significance of Insignificance

Readings for today: Joshua 1-2, Psalm 105

God is no respecter of persons. God does not look on the outward appearance of a man or woman. He doesn't look to their credentials or their titles or their net worth. God doesn't need the influential or the powerful or those with a large platform. God measures a person solely by what He sees in the heart. Is the person humble? Teachable? Do they seek to serve rather than be served? Do they love unconditionally? Are they repentant? Do they cultivate self-awareness? Do they have a sensitivity to the Holy Spirit? These are the qualities God looks for in a disciple and we see them on display in the life of a Canaanite prostitute named Rahab.

Rahab is the most unlikely of heroes. She is "triple outcast" due to her ethnicity, gender, and vocation. She lives and works in a disreputable area of town. She is the antithesis of the Law and yet she responds in faithfulness to Yahweh. "I know the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the Lord your God, He is the God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath." (Joshua 2:9-11) As Jesus Himself will later say, "blessed is the one who does not see and yet believes." Rahab is blessed for her faith. Though she did not personally witness the miracles that took place at the Red Sea or in the wilderness, she exhibits a deep sensitivity to God which leads her to repentance. Repentance simply means to "turn around." To make a 180 degree shift in life and head in a new direction. Rahab exhibits this on a number of levels. She turns from her pagan, Canaanite faith to embrace Yahweh as Lord. She turns from her tribal and ethnic identity to become one with the people of Israel. She turns from her life of prostitution and marries Salmon, becoming the great-great grandmother of King David. (Matthew 1:5)

Rahab's story is one of the most remarkable stories of redemption in all of Scripture. Without Rahab, the conquest of the Promised Land might have failed before it even started. Without Rahab, the people of Israel may have gotten bogged down in a pitched battle at Jericho. Without Rahab, the casualties would have been high, morale would have been lost, and the people might have gone back to Egypt. Her faith saved not only herself and her family but the people of God as well.

One of the great temptations we face is to assume we are too insignificant to be used by God. We look around at those who are more powerful, more influential, more popular and we wonder how in the world we can compete. We look at those who are more wealthy, more financially secure, who seem to have more disposable income and we wonder what difference we can make with our meager resources. We look at those who are younger and more attractive, more physically fit, more healthy and we wonder how we can keep up. We look at those who are smarter, have more degrees, who've achieved more success and we wonder why God would ever want to use us. Rahab's story exposes the lies we so often believe. Her testimony proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that God can and will use anyone who comes to Him by faith. Repent, friends! Turn and believe. Let God use you to further His great plan of salvation in the world!
Readings for tomorrow: None

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March 21, 2022

Altars

Readings for today: Joshua 3-6

“And Joshua said to them, "Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever." (Josh. 4:5-7)

When you think back on your life, where have you seen God at work? Where have you seen His finger touch down? Where have you witnessed Him working a miracle on your behalf? How do you remember such things? How do you mark such occasions? Israel built altars. They would take uncut stones and stack them on top of each other to remind themselves of God’s great faithfulness. As we get deeper into the Old Testament, it will soon feel like the landscape is riddled with these altars. It’s like you can’t travel anywhere in Israel without stumbling over an altar they’ve made! Altars were significant. Especially in an oral culture where many of the stories were not being written down as they happened but instead were passed from father to son, mother to daughter. Walking by an altar presented an opportunity for the family to pause and remember and re-tell the tale of God’s great love and miraculous deliverance for His people. These altars formed something like a national “scrapbook” or “Instagram” account for ancient Israel. A place they could go to be reminded of their most precious memories.

Of course, preserving the institutional memory of Israel was not the only purpose for the altars. There was an “evangelistic” component as well. “And he said to the people of Israel, "When your children ask their fathers in times to come, 'What do these stones mean?' then you shall let your children know, 'Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.' For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, that you may fear the Lord your God forever." (Josh. 4:21-24) Remember, God’s great aim is to fill the earth with His glory. His great vision at the end of time is that of every tribe, tongue, and nation coming to bow before His throne. Even here, Israel is being reminded of her calling to be a light to the nations. To reflect to the world the greatness and glory and majesty of God. Sometimes that will mean executing divine justice on the pagan tribes around them. Other times it will mean showing great mercy happened with Rahab and her family in Jericho. Through it all, God is making Himself known to the world in and through His people.

The same holds true today. God is making Himself known to the world through His people. His plan hasn’t changed. His purposes haven’t changed. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever! Where His people struggle, God brings comfort. Where His people fail, God brings discipline and judgment. Where His people step out in faith, God meets them and performs miracles on their behalf. This is who our God is and always will be!
Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 7-10

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March 22, 2022

Collective Guilt

Readings for today: Joshua 7-10

Today's reading is a tough one. Ancient Near East justice was often brutal and terrifying and impacted more than just the individual who committed the crime. Achan broke faith with God. He took items dedicated to the Lord and hid them in his tent for personal gain. This was not just stealing, it was sacrilege. Taking what is holy and desecrating it. Notice the play on words in this passage. Devoting the spoils of war to destruction typically meant burning them in a great bonfire as an offering to the Lord. However, Achan kept some of the devoted things for himself therefore the anger of the Lord "burned" against the people of Israel. Furthermore, once the sin was discovered, they took Achan and his family and all his possessions and "burned them with fire" in the valley of Achor. We cannot fathom how such an act could ever be called just and good much less be commanded by the Lord but again, God speaks to us in cultural language we can understand and He works through our common cultural understandings to reveal His will.

This raises another difficult question for us. The idea of collective guilt. Achan sins by taking some of the devoted things but the Lord's anger burns against the people of Israel. Thirty-six men die in the ensuing attack on Ai as God withdraws His protective hand in judgment. Many more are probably wounded in the assault as well. So much grief. So much pain. So much suffering. All because of one man's sin. And God makes it very clear He holds Israel responsible for what Achan has done. "Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I commanded them; they have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen and lied and put them among their own belongings. Therefore the people of Israel cannot stand before their enemies. They turn their backs before their enemies, because they have become devoted to destruction." (Joshua 7:11-12) Why did God not just kill off Achan? Why did He punish all of Israel for one individual's transgression? How in the world can this be fair?

Once again, we are confronted with cultural distance. We have been raised in a modern, western context which elevates the individual above the community. We think of ourselves as independent agents first and members of a community second. When a person sins or commits a crime, they do the time. They pay the price. They suffer the consequences. Not their family. Not their community. Not the people they are connected to unless they were active accomplices. The Ancient Near East was a much different world. The people of Israel held a collective identity. They understood themselves to be members of a community first and individuals second. They saw themselves as intrinsically connected to each other so when one person sinned, all were culpable. All had a share in the guilt. All were accomplices in allowing such a thing to take place. By the way, this idea is replete throughout the Scriptures and it is one of the major reasons we struggle to bridge the gap between the world of the Bible and our world today.

Friends, the reality is we are not just individuals with a personal relationship with God. We are members of a body called the church that holds a collective identity before the Lord. What we say or do impacts those around us. Our individual sin creates a ripple effect in the community that does have consequences. We are our brother and sister's keeper. We are responsible one for another. We are held accountable by God on some level for the way we contribute to the overall health and well-being of those around us whether it is in our families, among our friends, in our neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and communities. Our actions or lack of actions matter to God and they make a significant difference in the world. Thankfully, God doesn't just judge us collectively. He redeems us collectively

as well. 1 John 2:2 says, “Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” Thanks be to God for collective grace!

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 11-14

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March 23, 2022

Keeping Perspective

Readings for today: Joshua 11-14

It's about this time every year in my Bible reading that I start to get weary. Worn down by all the bloodshed and violence. Worn down by all the God-sanctioned religious warfare. Worn down by the thoughts of men, women, and children dying in these cities as Israel conquers the Promised Land. I am worn down by a world I do not understand. Worn down by the brutality of it all. Worn down trying to understand how God is driving it all. I come to the end of my finite mind. I come the end of my understanding. I come to the end of my ability to reason my way through. And I just sit with the horror of it all. Overwhelmed.

Several years ago, I had dinner with some friends. One of them does a lot of work in Rwanda with the mountain gorillas. He and his family have been engaged over there for decades helping with the research. He was there just after the genocide. He saw the bodies piled up in the streets. Stacks upon stacks. It was horrifying. He can never get the images out of his head. I have another friend who survived the Killing Fields of Cambodia. He remembers the mass graves. Miraculously escaped one himself. He remembers standing in a line as soldiers executed one person after the next and when it came his turn, they pulled him out of line for some reason and kept on killing. If there's anything history has taught us, it's that humanity's inhumanity knows no bounds. The purges in Maoist China and Stalinist Russia. The Holocaust. The recent invasion of Ukraine. Those are just the more recent examples! Think of the Mongolian conquest. The Crusades. The African slave trade. British occupation of India. Rome's brutal conquest of the Germanic tribes. For as long as human beings have walked this earth, there has been war. There has been violence. There has been suffering. In fact, some historians calculate that in the history of the entire human race, we've experienced four years of peace. FOUR! Can you imagine?

When human beings engage in such violence, they tend to pull on a common thread…God. God ordains this war. God sanctions this violence. God is on our side. God commands us to fight these battles and destroy these enemies. But is this really true? I readily admit I struggle through the histories of the Old Testament even more than I do Leviticus. In my head, I can make some sense of the law code but I cannot rationalize all the death and destruction. So what's a faithful, Bible-believing Christian to do?

Three things help get me through this part of the reading every single year...

Joshua 5:13-15. At the beginning of the conquest, before the fall of Jericho, the commander of the Lord's armies appears to Joshua. Joshua falls on his face before him and asks him if He is for Israel or for their adversaries. It's a great question. It's a common question. Essentially, he's asking the angel, "Are you for us or against us?" Are you on our side or their side? Are you team Israel or team Canaanite? I love the angel's response. "No, I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come." Basically, the only "side" I'm on is my own! I am no tribal deity. I am not like the other gods. I reign and rule according to my own sovereign purposes and plan.

My finite mind. My understanding of the world is shaped by time, culture, space, nation, etc. I am not an "objective" observer of history. There is no such thing. I have built-in biases and assumptions that I bring to the table when I read the Word of God that act as "filters." These filters can be helpful or harmful depending on the text and will shape how I "receive" the Word of God in any situation.

Humility. I need to read with humility because I do not know all the answers. Nor will I ever. My questions and fears and doubts are real and I may not find satisfaction this side of heaven. That's okay. If there is a God who rules and reigns over the universe and if this God is good then I can ultimately trust Him. I can trust He sees things I cannot and He is orchestrating things to His own ends which are ultimately holy and righteous and just.

There is one more thing I always try to keep in mind. My own sinfulness. The evil I carry in my own heart. Like the Apostle Paul, I do things I know I should not do. I don't do things I know I should do. Every day is full of the sins of "commission" and the sins of "omission" that negatively impact the lives of those I love and the lives of those I am around. The evil in the world is not just "out there" but inside of me as well. So I read with the understanding that but for the grace of God, I too deserve death and destruction. And that moves my heart to praise and thanksgiving for what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 15-18

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March 24, 2022

Finishing Strong

Readings for today: Joshua 15-18

The key is not how we start the race but how we finish. I remember running in my first 5K when I was a young boy with my brothers. It was the Denver Symphony Run in downtown Denver. I remember the day was dreary and rainy. I remember pushing my way to the front of the start line with my brothers. I remember the starting gun going off and the three of us sprinting to the front of the pack. We led the race for about the first 50 yards. You probably can imagine what happened next. We spent the next three miles alternating between jogging and walking as we struggled to finish. It was a painful experience.

Israel sprints out of the gates in their conquest of the Promised Land. They win victory after victory. Joshua's leadership is exceptional. His tactics strong. His strategic decisions brilliant. Always in the right place at the right time. Anticipating. Attacking and counter-attacking. It reminds me of the movie, When We Were Soldiers, and how Colonel Hal Moore seemed to make every right move. The first campaign has come to an end. Israel is now firmly and deeply entrenched. They are the new power to be reckoned with in the region. But Joshua cannot be everywhere all at once so it is now up to each tribe to go out and secure their inheritance. They are to go out with the same faith and boldness and courage that marked Moses and Joshua and complete the conquest. They are to place their trust in God and His ability to fight on their behalf. But they fail. They fall short. They lose heart. So the Jebusites remain in the territory of Judah. The Gezerites remain in the territory of Ephraim. Other Canaanites remain in the territory of Manasseh. As they struggle to uproot those already living in the land, they start to lose heart. They give into fear. They are afraid of the military might of those who oppose them. The iron chariots and those fortified in the hill country. They worry they won't succeed. They take their eyes off of Yahweh. They forget His faithfulness. And the conquest is never fully completed.

Finishing is hard. How many people do you know who start this race we call the Christian life only to wither along the way? Jesus knew this about us and He even told a story once about a farmer who went out to plant his seeds. Some seeds fell on the hard path. Some seeds fell among the rocks. Some seeds fell among the weeds. Other seeds in good soil. Each tried to take root. The seeds on the path had nowhere to go so they were eaten by the birds. The seeds among the rocks had no place to put down roots so they sprung up quickly but then died. The seeds that fell among the weeds also sprung up but were eventually choked off. Finally, the seed that fell on good soil produced a bountiful harvest. What makes up the soil of your heart? Did the seeds of the gospel ever find purchase in your heart? Did they spring up only to die for lack of roots? Did the cares and the worries of this world choke off your faith? Or are you producing a harvest of righteousness? Are you finishing the race strong?

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 19-22

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March 25, 2022

Witness

Readings for today: Joshua 19-22

“The people of Reuben and the people of Gad called the altar Witness, "For," they said, "it is a witness between us that the Lord is God." (Josh. 22:34)

What does it mean to be a witness? And what are we “witnessing” to? For the tribes of Israel, the altar by the Jordan was built to remind them they were all part of one large family. Deeply connected not only by their common kinship with Abraham but also their covenant with God Himself. The tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh were concerned that future generations might forget this connection and start to see the Jordan River as the boundary between God’s people and the rest of the world. They didn’t want to be left out so before they crossed the Jordan to take possession of their inheritance, they built a monument of “imposing size.” Not for burnt offerings. Not for sacrifices. But as a witness to all of Israel that they were one people under Yahweh. Every time an Israelite would pass by the monument, it would “witness” to their shared history and deep connection.

In the Book of Acts, Jesus calls us “His witnesses.” We are witnesses in our neighborhoods, cities, nations, and to the very ends of the earth. In this way, we are living memorials to all God has done. We are living monuments to a shared history. A common heritage. The deep connection we share as God’s chosen people. We “witness” to the glory and goodness of God. We “witness” to the unity we share as the family of God. Anytime someone “passes us by” or interacts with us on any level, they should leave having “witnessed” the mercy and grace of God and having experienced the deep love we have for one another.

Ultimately, the Bible itself is the pre-eminent witness. I love what Joshua 21:45 says, “Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.” The only reason we know this statement is true is because we have an accurate record of what took place. This is why we read the Old Testament. Within its pages, God “witnesses” to us over and over again of His great faithfulness and love. Even in the face of our sin. Even in the face of our rebellion. Even in the face of our evil. Even in the face of our failures. Even in the face of all our brokenness, God pursues us. God relentlessly chases us. God never lets us go.

I know reading through the Bible in a year is not easy! It indeed is a “monument of imposing size!” But as we sit with God’s Word and prayerfully reflect on all He has to say, we are shaped and formed in ways we cannot begin to imagine.

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 23-24, Judges 1

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March 26, 2022

Choose this Day…

Readings for today: Joshua 23-24, Judges 1

My grandfather was my spiritual hero. A man who loved and served Jesus for over ninety years. He started preaching at 14. He didn't stop until he was in his late eighties. After retiring from full-time ministry and moving into a retirement community, he worked part-time at a local church and did all the visitation and pastoral care for the graduated care facility. I remember sitting with him in his living room and reading the Bible together after I became a Christian. He had read through the Bible who knows how many times over the years. It was my first time through. In the middle of our time together, he paused and said, "hmmm...never seen that before." I said, "What do you mean? Haven't you read through the Bible like a million times, granddad?" "Yes", he replied, "But there's always more to discover." When I graduated from seminary, granddad was dying. He had a few months left to live. He was living in a room with grandma who was catatonic from Alzheimer's and was suffering from some paralyzation due to a burst cyst in his ear. My mom warned me he probably wouldn't be able to talk. I walked into the room and for the next TWO HOURS he proceeded to talk my ear off about life and ministry and my future as a pastor. He was so proud. So excited. It was like he had been saving up all his words just for me. He "went the way of all the earth" just two months later. He and grandma died within two weeks of each other. It was the first funeral I performed as a pastor.

One generation rises. Another falls. But the promises of God remain the same. "Therefore, be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left...Be very careful, therefore, to love the Lord your God...And you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one word has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one of them has failed." (Josh. 23:6, 11, 14) Think of all the things Joshua had seen! Slavery in Egypt. The plagues. The parting of the Red Sea. God meeting with His people on Sinai. The Ten Commandments. Manna from heaven. Wilderness wandering. Water from rocks. The parting of the Jordan. The incredible victories against Jericho and Ai. The beginning of the conquest of the Promised Land. What a life! And through it all, what marked Joshua was an unwavering commitment to serve the Lord. To love the Lord with all his heart and soul and mind and strength. Joshua was a worthy successor to Moses and led God's people well. And now at the end of his life, he challenges the people to carry on! To continue to trust God! To walk in faith and see the fulfilllment of all God had promised!

"Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Josh. 24:14-15) Choose this day whom you will serve. The question reverberates throughout history. Every generation is called upon to answer. Will we love and fear and serve the Lord? Or will we bow down to the gods of our own making? The gods of our culture? The gods we once served before coming to faith? As for me and my house...we will serve the Lord!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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March 28, 2022

The Power of One

Readings for today: Judges 2-5

All it takes is one. That's the message I send every time I consult with a struggling church. One leader. One person of influence who is willing to seek the Lord. Willing to humble themselves before Him. Willing to walk in the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of all wisdom and strength. So many churches are struggling in America right now. According to some statistics, 80-85% of churches in the evangelical space are plateaued or declining. The numbers are worse in the mainline denominational world. It's heartbreaking. Church consultants have discerned any number of reasons. Confusion over mission. Disconnection from the local community. Unresolved conflict. Spiritual abuse and neglect. Sin in the camp. Dysfunctional leadership. The list goes on. Where to find hope?

The Book of Judges is one of the most depressing in all of Scripture. Israel suffers tremendously under the weight of sin and disobedience. God simply gives them over to the desires of their hearts and the results are devastating. However, renewal is always just one godly leader away. All it takes is one man or one woman who seeks God with all their heart. One man or one woman who has the courage to take a stand for their faith in the face of incredible odds. One man or one woman who is willing to endure hardship for the sake of a cause greater than themselves. God raises up such men and women. Makes them judges for His people. Spiritual leaders who become "saviors" of a sort. The result is repentance. Freedom. Deliverance for God's people.

I see the same dynamic in play in our day and age. It's the hope I offer every church I work with. All it takes is one leader who is willing to seek the Lord with all their heart. One leader who has the courage to stand for their faith and remain healthy and differentiated in the face of incredible odds. One leader who is willing to endure all sorts of hardship and pain for the sake of congregational renewal. Most of the time it is the pastor but it could just as easily be a key elder, key deacon, key lay leader. All congregations are emotional systems. As such, they are intimately and intrinsically connected. When one leader within the system makes the decision to pursue greater levels of emotional and spiritual health, the system is forced to respond. At first there is always pushback as the system reacts by trying to turn the leader back. All systems tend to resist healthy change. But if the leader remains courageous and perseveres, the system will eventually adjust and become more healthy itself. Ideally, of course, it's not just one leader who makes this decision but a group of leaders. Men and women who can support and encourage each other along the way.

Perhaps you belong to a struggling church. Perhaps it's your business or family that's struggling. All of us belong to emotional systems. The good news is God can use anyone to bring about spiritual and emotional renewal. All we have to do is turn to Him. All we have to do is humble ourselves before Him. All we have to do is walk in the fear of the Lord to receive wisdom and strength for the journey.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 6-9

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March 29, 2022
The Work of Renewal

Readings for today: Judges 6-9

Renewal never comes easy. Not in my experience. Renewal in a marriage. Renewal in a family. Renewal in a congregation. Renewal in a community. It comes through hardship and suffering and a lot of pain. There is conflict to manage. Egos to assuage. Obstacles to overcome. Perhaps the biggest challenge is not external but internal. Our insecurities. Our lack of confidence. Our aversion to risk.

Gideon is the least likely of heroes. He's an insignificant son of the weakest clan in the tribe of Manasseh. He's just an ordinary guy trying to do his best to make his way in a very tough world. When the angel of the Lord first approaches him, he's threshing grain in a winepress and attempting to hide from the Midianites. When the angel addresses Gideon as a "mighty man of valor", Gideon responds by telling him he's got the wrong guy. He's showed up at the wrong house. He's in the wrong part of town. When the angel further tells Gideon he will deliver Israel, Gideon needs multiple confirmations involving a fleece before he will agree. Once the decision is made, Gideon assembles an overwhelming force of men to go with him. God strips his force down to 300. This makes Gideon fearful and anxious. Nothing about this process is easy. Nothing about it is guaranteed. God is taking Gideon beyond himself, forcing him into a place of utter dependence so he will learn to trust in God and not himself.

I see this happen all the time in the marriages, families, churches, and communities I work with. Husbands and wives come into my office at the end of their rope. They've done all they can to manage the conflict in their relationship but things have only gotten worse not better. They can't hear each other. They can't see each other. They can't understand each other. They want to call it quits. Meeting with me is often their last resort. Parents and children come into my office at each other's throats. So much anger. So much hurt. Every conversation seems to devolve into an argument. Voices are raised. Painful things are said. They wound each other deeply. They see no way out. Pastors and other church leaders email or call. They are confused. Frustrated. Hurt. Depressed. Exhausted. They've tried so hard to love their church. Tried so hard to serve their church. Tried so hard to lead their church. What have they received in return? Their motives are questioned. Their character is impugned. Their reputation is trashed. People do all they can to subvert and sabotage even their best efforts.

The work of renewal is not for the faint of heart. It requires courage to face down the forces that oppose God's work. To turn away anger with gentleness. To meet sin with grace. To be a peacemaker in the face of conflict. To persevere under the unrelenting pressure. But God can strengthen the weary heart. God can mend the broken heart. God can give courage to the faint of heart. God specializes in bringing hope in the most hopeless of situations.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 10-13

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March 30, 2022

Jephthah's Vow

Readings for today: Judges 10-13

When we travel to Ethiopia, we often head into the rural areas to visit village churches. As we walk along the dirt paths, we pass home after home. Most of them are mud huts surrounded by a little brush fence. In the evenings, we see children driving whatever livestock (donkeys, chickens, goats, etc.) the family owns into the enclosure. This keeps the animals safe and the house warm. It's a common custom all over the Middle East even to this day.

Hopefully, this places Jephthah's tragic vow in context. He fully expected the first thing to greet him when he returned home to be a goat or a sheep or some other animal. He most certainly did NOT expect it to be his daughter! So when she comes dancing out of the home with her tambourine, he tears his clothes. He instantly regrets the vow he made. He feels trapped. And how does his daughter respond? Her reaction is perhaps the most surprising part of this story. She willingly lays down her life for her father! She faces her fate with courage and faith. Taking two full months to say goodbye and grieve with her friends. Two full months to weep over what could have been.

It's a story that baffles us on a lot of levels. How could Jephthah sacrifice his own flesh and blood? How could Jephthah's daughter willingly lay down her life? And where is God in all of this? Is He pleased? The cultural distance between this world and our own is almost insurmountable. However, one key to understanding is Judges 11:23-24, "So then the Lord, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them? Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the Lord our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess." Everyone in the ancient near east believed in gods. Dagon for the Philistines. Chemosh for the Amorites. Molech for the Ammonites. Every tribe had their own deity. Make the right sacrifices and you were awarded with great wealth, military might, and political power. Make the wrong sacrifices and your deity would turn his face from you, resulting in poverty, weakness, and defeat. One some level, the same now held true for Israel. As they adopted the ways of their Canaanite neighbors, Yahweh ceased - on some level - to be the One True God and became just another tribal deity to be appeased. This helps explain Jephthah's tragic choice to sacrifice his daughter and her tragic choice to accept her fate. Most importantly, God is silent throughout. Nowhere does the Bible say God is pleased with Jephthah's decision.

What about us? We claim to worship the supreme God of the universe. We claim to know the King of kings and Lord of lords. We claim to be heirs of His eternal Kingdom. But do our lives reflect this truth? How much have we accommodated to the ways of this world? Brought God down to our level? Limited Him to our tribe? Reduced Him to our personal deity?

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 14-18

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March 31, 2022
Flawed Heroes

Readings for today: Judges 14-18

I grew up in church. Sunday school every weekend. Learning the Bible stories via flannel board. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Noah on his ark. Moses parting the Red Sea. Joshua and the battle of Jericho. One of my favorites was Samson. For a young boy, what's not to like? Strength. Power. One man winning victory after victory culminating in a final heroic act of self-sacrifice where Samson literally brings the roof down on his enemies!

As I got older, I began to learn about all the stuff my Sunday school teachers left out. Rightfully, by the way, as I was too young to understand. Adam and Eve's rebellion and descent into sin. Noah and his family being saved but at incredible cost. Moses parting the Red Sea but often ending up in these violent clashes that would end in entire families being wiped out. Joshua devoting entire cities to destruction. And Samson. A moral train wreck of a man. Selfish. Immature. A man who seems to use his God-given gifts for his own gain and self-gratification. What are we to make of such heroes? The Bible seems full of them. Broken, frail, sinful men and women who are subsequently enshrined in the great "Hall of Fame" of faith in Hebrews 11?

First and foremost, we are to see them as they are...not as we wish they would be. They are human beings. As such, they are sinners just like us. People whom God chooses to use despite their shortcomings and failings. By the way, this is one of the best arguments for the trustworthiness of Scripture. It paints an honest picture of God's chosen people. Putting their weaknesses on display right alongside their strengths. Compare that to the sacred writings of other major world religions where heroes are whitewashed to perfection.

Second, we are to look beyond them to the true source of their strength. The true source of their wisdom. The true source of all their miracles and great victories. It is the Spirit of the Lord that rushes on Samson and gives him the ability to tear a lion apart. Kill a bunch of Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. Trap and tie torches to hundreds of foxes. Tear off a city gate. Bring an entire building down around him. This is not Samson's doing. It has very little to do with the length of his hair. That's superstitious nonsense! Not cutting his hair was simply an outward sign of the Nazirite Vow his parents had taken on his behalf before he was even conceived. (Judges 13:2-5) Keeping the vow was a sign of his devotion and dedication to the Lord, the true source of his strength. When he treated his vow casually by allowing his wife to manipulate him, his strength left him. Again, not because of his hair but because he had despised the Lord.

Finally, the entire book of Judges is meant to lead us to despair. Each judge over Israel seems less and less capable of leading well. They are increasingly morally compromised. Increasingly they lose sight of the One True God. Increasingly they abandon the ways of the Lord and follow their own paths. In fact, the city of Dan - a major city in the Northern Kingdom of Israel - will continue to be a city known for its idolatry. Jeroboam will put one of his golden calves here in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. So what begins with violence and idolatry by the tribe of Dan will continue until the day God sends the Assyrians to wipe out the northern kingdom altogether.

Why drive us to such despair? To teach us yet again of our need for God. Over and over again, the same narrative is reinforced. Humanity is hopeless. From Adam and Eve to the Great Flood. From Noah to the Tower of Babel. From Abraham to slavery in Egypt. From Moses to the end of Judges.

With each generation, man’s inhumanity to man only grows. Only increases. Only becomes more pervasive. And we would be lost except for God. He continues to pursue us. He continues to reach out to us. He continues to be faithful even in the face of our unfaithfulness. The climax of the Biblical story is, of course, something we celebrate on Holy Week. Jesus’ suffering and death and resurrection is God’s ultimate and final victory over humanity’s sin and the curse of death.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 19-21

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April 1, 2022

The Horror

Readings for today: Judges 19-21

Today we encounter some of the most difficult material in all of Scripture. We see Israel at her lowest point. She has forgotten Yahweh. She has become like the pagan tribes around her. She is more focused on her own gratification than she is on serving and honoring the Lord. Her world is full of idols and sexual perversion and violence. Yes, she still goes through the motions. She still makes her sacrifices. She still prays. Fasts. Appears before the Lord at the appointed times. But it's all empty at this point. Everyone is doing what seems right to them. They are all following their own ways. They are plumbing the depths of sin. They are pushing the boundaries of evil. Unspeakable atrocities are taking place in Israel such as the gang rape of a woman whose body is then dismembered resulting in a genocidal war that basically annihilates an entire tribe. It's madness.

One of my favorite books is the Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad. With penetrating insight, he describes the nature of man. Given the right conditions. Given the right set of circumstances. We will all succumb to temptation. In the book, Kurtz sets himself up as a god to be worshipped. He exploits those around him. He uses them for his own personal gratification and enjoyment. He is evil and selfish and insane. Towards the end of the story, he finds himself dying as he "returns" to civilization. His life flashes before his eyes. He reflects back on all he has done. And his final words are, "The horror! The horror!"

Horror. It's a good word to describe what we read today from the book of Judges. There simply is nothing redemptive in the story. Nothing good. Nothing godly. Man's inhumanity to man is on full display. It's dark. It's evil. It's terrifying.

Horror. It's a good word to describe what's going on in our world today. One only has to scroll through a Twitter newsfeed or watch cable news to see the hate that leads to violence that leads to death and then return the next day to watch the cycle repeat itself.

Horror. If we're totally honest, it's a good word to describe what goes on in all of our hearts. All of us are perpetrators. All of us are victims. We are the Levite. We are the concubine. We've sacrificed others and we've been sacrificed for the sake of self-protection and self-gratification. In the Bible's judgment, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Romans 3:10-18)

Perhaps it's providential that we read this section of Judges as we head towards Holy Week. A season we dedicate to reflection on the horror of the Cross and the death of God. We reflect on the price Jesus paid. The blood He shed. The penalty He bore. We reflect on the suffering He endured. The pain He experienced. The heartbreak of betrayal. We reflect on the depth of our sin. The depravity of our nature. The darkness of our hearts. We reflect on the cost of our salvation. On what it took to redeem us from sin and death. To deliver us from evil.

Of course, we also reflect on our salvation! God plunging Himself into the horror of our condition! Plunging into the depths of our darkness! Immersing Himself in the breadth of our madness! Embracing us as His own! In Christ, there is hope for the Levite and his concubine! In Christ, there is hope for the Kurtz's of our world! In Christ, there is hope even for us! And that hope is found in Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: Ruth 1-4

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April 2, 2022

Great Redeemer

Readings for today: Ruth 1-4

Thank God we made it to Ruth! I love the book of Ruth. It upends so many of our expectations and helps us come to a deeper understanding of the heart of God. Ruth is a Moabite. A foreigner. A sojourner. She married an Israelite named Chilion and became part of his extended family. This was forbidden by the Law of God but it took place during the time of the judges when everyone was doing right in their own eyes. Then tragedy strikes. Her father-in-law, Elimelech, dies. Ten years later both her husband and his brother die as well. This puts the whole family at risk. There are no men to work. No men to protect the widowed women. So Naomi makes the decision to return home. She encourages her Moabite daughters-in-law to do the same. Start over. See if they have better luck with a new family because hers has brought them only grief. Ruth refuses. She makes this extraordinary declaration, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” (Ruth 1:16) So powerful is her statement that we often hear it read at weddings thousands of years later!

Ruth not only returns with Naomi to Bethlehem, she cares faithfully for her mother-in-law. She puts her life at risk by going out to the fields to glean what was left after the reapers had made their way through. It was backbreaking, painstaking work. Women who did this were often molested, harassed, and abused. They were the poorest of the poor in the land. Completely without hope. In the providence of God, the field she chose belonged to a man named Boaz. A righteous man. A man who left the gleanings for the poor as the Law of God demands. (Lev. 19:9-10) A man who protected her from the men who worked for him. A man who included her among his own young women so she woudn’t be alone. Even invited her to sit and eat at his table. Boaz is a man who clearly honors the Lord. I love what he says to Ruth when she asks him why she has found favor in his eyes. “The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!" (Ruth 2:12)

Naomi cannot believe their good fortune! Ruth has been led by God to the very fields of the man who can redeem them! (Lev. 25) A man who is a close enough relative to bring them into his home and continue the family line! Thus unfolds a beautiful courtship in chapter three where Ruth goes and lies at Boaz’s feet to ask him to take them in. Boaz is humbled by the request and makes the necessary arrangements to become their kinsman-redeemer. They get married. Conceive a son. The family line continues which is important since her great-grandson is King David! Furthermore, many generations hence, her descendent Joseph will marry a young pregnant woman named Mary and they will have a son named Jesus. The Great Redeemer who will save His people from their sins!

After all the bloodshed and violence and suffering and pain, it is nice to read that not all was lost in Israel. Even in the time of the judges, there were still faithful men and women who followed the Lord. It is a great reminder to us in our own time that the night is always darkest right before the dawn. Next Saturday is Holy Saturday. A day where Christians reflect on the death of their Lord. His body lying on a cold slab. Wrapped in a burial shroud. Death seemingly having the victory. Sin and Evil seemingly having their way. The Son of God seemingly defeated. We wait on that day in silence. With baited breath for we know what the next day brings! Victory! Jesus rising from the grave! Jesus throwing open the door of the tomb! Death could not hold him! Hell could not defeat Him! Sin and Evil had no power over Him! Jesus is our Great Redeemer! Jesus is our Great Savior!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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April 4, 2022

A Mother's Devotion

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 1-3

Monica was born in 331 AD to a moderately wealthy family. Though raised as a Christian, she was given in marriage to a non-Christian man named Patricius. Together they had three children who survived infancy. One of them was named Augustine. Monica did not have an easy life. Her husband had a violent temper. Her mother-in-law was a challenge to live with. Her son, though incredibly brilliant, was a happy pagan. All of this could have made Monica bitter and angry but instead she chose to direct her energies to prayer. One by one, her family gave their lives to Christ. Her mother-in-law was won over by her grace and charity. Her husband gave his life to Christ a year before he died. She continued to pray for her son, following him to the city of Milan where he came under the influence of a bishop named Ambrose. As Monica poured her heart out for Augustine to Bishop Ambrose, he is said to have remarked, "I cannot believe a child of such tears shall ever perish." Augustine soon came to faith and was baptized on Easter in 387AD, becoming one of the most influential Christians in history. After his baptism, his mother told him, "Son, nothing in this world now affords me delight. I do not know what there is now left for me to do or why I am still here, all my hopes in this world being now fulfilled." She died soon after.

I thought of Monica as I read about the devotion of Hannah this morning. Hannah did not have an easy life. Her barrenness would have been perceived as God's curse. Her treatment at the hands of her rival, Peninnah, would have been difficult to endure. Most of her community would look on her with pity. It would be easy for Hannah to give into grief and despair. But Hannah turns her energies into prayer. She seeks the Lord with all her heart. She promises to devote her firstborn son to His service if He will simply hear and answer her prayers. God remembers Hannah. He hears her prayers and grants her heart's desire. Hannah proves faithful. She weans the child and then brings him to Eli so he can be brought up at the Tabernacle which was then located in a city called Shiloh. She never ceases to pray for him. Never ceases to care for him. She even brings him a little robe when she and her husband came up for the annual sacrifice. The impact of her faithful devotion is incredible. Samuel comes to faith at a young age and becomes one of Israel's greatest judges and prophets.

I imagine all of us can relate even if we don't have children of our own. All of us know what it's like to watch a loved one struggle. Perhaps life deals them a bad hand. Perhaps they are struck down with a terrible disease. Perhaps they struggle with their faith. Whatever it may be, it is always tempting to let ourselves become bitter and frustrated and angry with God if He delays in answering our prayers. It's easy to become impatient or throw in the towel or give up. But faithful people like Hannah and Monica remind us of the power of persistent, devoted prayer.

I have experienced this in my own life. I have prayed over family members for years. I have shed so many tears for them. I have sought God on their behalf. I've spent many a sleepless night pacing the floor crying out to God. Sometimes I get frustrated with God. Sometimes I get angry with Him. Sometimes I throw my hands up in despair. But saints like Hannah and Monica and Don and Berk and Daisy and Sam and James and Sarah and Lisa and a host of others have inspired me to keep coming back to the Lord. They have encouraged me to hold fast to God's promises. To believe God when He says He will never stop pursuing those He loves and He will bring to completion the good work He's begun.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 4-8

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April 5, 2022

Talisman

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 4-8

I remember the first time I watched Raiders of the Lost Ark. Such a great movie. Action. Adventure. Suspense. Mystery. It remains a favorite to this day. The heart of the movie is the search for a lost talisman. A sacred treasure. The Nazis want to capture the ark and use it to conquer the world. Indiana Jones wants to capture the ark and put it on display in a museum. Both sides miss the point. The ark of the covenant has no power of its own. Looking into the ark isn't going to cause your face to melt off. There are no ghosts lurking inside. No insidious force waiting to pounce on the unsuspecting. It simply is a box built to carry the most treasured memories of God's chosen people. The budded rod of Aaron. A jar of manna from heaven. The stone tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments.

Human beings have this tendency to turn ordinary things into magic totems. We are desperate for something concrete that we can touch and hold and see and feel. We are deeply uncomfortable with the unknown and the unfamiliar. So we make idols like golden calves or bronze snakes. We build beautiful spaces like the Tabernacle and adorn it with golden furniture like the ark but promptly forget the point of it all which is to connect to God.

In our passage today, Israel treats the ark like a magic charm. A good luck token. They mistakenly assumed the ark itself contained power when in fact it was useless. It was just a golden box. The Philistines made a similar mistake. They assumed the ark represented a god and they trembled in fear. Both sides missed the point. In the ensuing battle, the Philistines easily overwhelm Israel. They slaughter thirty thousand on the battlefield. They capture the ark. They kill the priests. They return to their cities having won a great victory not only over Israel but seemingly over Israel's god. So they take the ark and put it in one of their temples as tribute to their own god, Dagon. When they get up the next morning - probably hung over from the celebration the night before - they can't believe their eyes. Dagon had fallen on his face before the ark. So they set his statue back up again but the following day they find him fallen yet again to the ground this time with his head and hands cut off. A plague sweeps the city. People start getting sick and dying. They take the ark to another city but the same thing happens. They send it to a third city but the people of that city won't let it in. So they send the ark back to Israel with an offering. Golden tumor and golden mice to represent the plague they had suffered. It's important to note the lesson they learned. What they did with the ark was of little importance compared with what they did to honor the God of Israel.

What about us? How often do we turn ordinary things in our own lives into sacred talismans. We place our trust in a particular place or particular style of worship or a particular personality in the pulpit, We treat prayer like some magic formula. The Word of God like some magic book. Friends, none of these things contain any power or authority of their own. Sacred space is important not because of the space itself but because of what happens there. The worship of the Living God. Worship style is important not because of the words or melodies or instrumentation but because of how it points us to God. Prayer is important not because we are good at it or know just the right words to say but because it is the primary way we talk to God. The Bible is important not because of the words on the page but because of how the Holy Spirit uses those words to transform us into the image of God. God is gracious to us. He reveals Himself to us through ordinary means of grace. Make sure you don't ascribe to those "ordinary means" any more credit than they deserve. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 9-12

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April 6, 2022

Visions and Dreams

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 9-12

Several years ago, I was in Ethiopia helping lead a training conference for church planters. About midway through the conference, a striking young man walked up to a group I was talking to. He was dressed head to toe like a traditional Muslim warrior. Flowing robes. Head covering. Curved sword on his hip. We found someone who spoke his dialect and asked him what he needed. He share the most amazing story with us. He grew up in a Muslim village and had never met a Christian. He didn't even know the name of Jesus. But the Lord revealed Himself to him in a dream one night and he surrendered his life to Him. He woke up the next morning and began preaching about this man who had come to him in his dream. The entire village converted. Now he was left with a dilemma? What to do next? He had no Bible. There was no church in the area. So he prayed to the Lord and the Lord told him to show up in a particular village on a particular day at a particular time and he would be given the resources he needed. The village was Gojo. The day and time coincided with our training conference. It was an absolute miracle.

It's always hard to read stories like the one we encounter today. Depending on our faith background, we aren't necessarily used to the idea that God would speak to us in dreams and visions. Today, Saul appears before Samuel. This came as no surprise to Samuel because God had already told him the day before what was going to take place. A man from the tribe of Benjamin would appear out of nowhere. Samuel was to anoint this man king over all Israel. Saul's task was to reign over God's people and deliver them from the hands of their enemies. It's a miraculous story. Especially when one considers all the details that had to take place in order to make it happen. Lost donkeys. A servant's suggestion to see the "seer." The fact that Samuel just happened to be in town on that particular day. Three men going up to Bethel with goats, bread, and wine. The confirmation of Saul's kingship through prophesy. It's amazing.

Why don't these things happen more often today? Why do we not see the miracles of God like they did in the Bible or like they do in other parts of the world? If we're honest, it's because we don't need God. Not really. Not in the same way. Most of us live lives of plenty. We have plenty of money. Plenty of time. Plenty of resources at our disposal. This is why Jesus said it's harder for a rich person to get into heaven than a camel through the eye of a needle. We tend to rely on ourselves. On our own strength and ability and wisdom and for the most part…it works! Or so we think. Contrast that with the people of Israel in Samuel's day. They were oppressed. Constantly under threat. They were a subsistence agricultural society. The same is true in places like Ethiopia where the local population fights everyday to survive. This is why their faith is so strong. They depend on the miracles of God and He delivers. Friends, the challenge for us is to learn how to depend on God in the same way. To open our hands and hearts to Him and surrender all control. To spend time in silence and solitude before Him. To worship Him in spirit and in truth. As we do these things, God promises to meet with us. He promises to speak to us. He promises to provide for us. He promises to deliver us.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 13-16

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April 7, 2022

First Love

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 13-16

What does it mean to love God with a “whole” heart? To be fully devoted to Him? To make Him our first love? Does it mean outward perfection? King Saul literally stood head and shoulders above his countrymen. (1 Sam. 10:23) Eliab, David’s older brother, clearly was an impressive physical specimen. (1 Sam. 16:6) Does it mean achievement or success? I am sure God could easily have lined up a hundred other men who had accomplished a heck of a lot more than David. Is it based on wealth or privilege? Or perhaps great moral character? What kind of heart does God treasure in a man or woman? The key is found in 1 Sam. 15:22-23..."Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.” Humility. Submission. Obedience. These are the qualities on which God places supreme value. Are we willing to listen? Willing to surrender our plans in favor of God’s plan for our lives? Are we willing to trust God even when our circumstances seem bleak? Are we willing to obey even when it’s hard?

King Saul was a half-hearted man. Though he was chosen by God and instructed by Samuel in the “rights and duties” of godly kingship, his heart was divided. At times, Saul was faithful and found great success. At other times, he was unfaithful and found only heartbreak. In times of conflict, Saul seemed to trust in God and therefore win victory after victory. In times of preparation or peace, Saul seemed to forget God and trust in his own understanding. The unlawful sacrifice at Gilgal. A rash vow during the heat of battle. A refusal to devote the Amalekites to destruction. These events illustrate the half-hearted devotion Saul paid to Yahweh and it eventually cost him everything. The kingdom was literally ripped from his hands. The Spirit of the Lord departed from him. And he ended up paranoid and tormented.

King David was a whole-hearted man. As we will see, David was a man after God’s own heart. This doesn’t make him perfect. His failures are massive and significant and costly. But through it all, David keeps seeking after God. David keeps humbling himself before God. David keeps returning to God in repentance. And God loves David. Honors David. Promises to give the throne to his descendents for generations.

So time to take stock. Time to step back and honestly examine your own heart. Are you half-hearted or whole-hearted in your devotion to God? Half-hearted or whole-hearted in your love for Jesus? How do you know? We’ve already seen that it doesn’t necessarily depend on our outward appearance or achievement or actions. We can’t count on the image we project to the world to save us. We have to be strong and courageous enough to take the inward journey into the heart. What do we find there? A love for God? A desire to serve Him? Please Him? Be with Him? Do we find in our hearts a hunger and thirst for righteousness? A deep awareness of the poverty of our own spiritual condition? Do we grieve over our sin? These are important questions that serve as a “diagnostic” to help us discern the spiritual condition of our hearts.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 17-20, Psalm 59

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April 8, 2022

Trusting God

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 17-20, Psalm 59

What does it mean to trust God? As Christians, we talk about it all the time. But what does that actually look like in real life? David was a strong young man. A man entrusted with protecting the wealth of his family. A man who spent his days and nights out in the fields. Through all kinds of weather. Suffering all kinds of hardship. Fighting off lions and bears and other wild animals. David is no novice to conflict. No fearful young boy. His confidence has been forged in the fires of hardship and struggle.

Now he stands next to his brother as Goliath taunts the armies of Israel. David has as much right to be there as anyone. He may be a little younger but he's just as qualified. There were no standing professional armies in those days so most of the warriors who had gathered to fight for Saul were much like him. Farmers. Sheep herders. Men of the fields. Men of the forge. Men who spent most of their lives in other professions. Goliath was an exception. He truly was a professional warrior. Someone who had trained for battle since his youth. A man of imposing size who the Philistines used to strike fear in their enemies. He challenges Israel. More importantly, he challenges God Himself.

David trusts God. David attributes his past success to the Lord. "The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine." (1 Samuel 17:37) David has faced incredible odds before. Fighting off lions and bears is no joke! It required courage to track those animals down and save his sheep. And it will require courage to go out and face this Philistine. David doesn't blink. He grabs his sling and a few stones and off he goes.

It's one thing to say you trust God. It's another to actually place yourself in a situation where that trust is put to the test. "Trusting God" for David meant defending his flocks against lions and bears. "Trusting God" for David meant going out to face the Philistine giant. "Trusting God" for David meant not retaliating when Saul became jealous and sought to kill him. "Trusting God" for David meant continuing to serve Saul even though he was being treated unjustly. Over and over again, David trusts God with his life. His reputation. His relationships. His future. Remember, he's already been anointed the next king! One would think he might try to grasp after what is rightfully his. Manipulate things in his favor. Use Saul's mental instability to his own advantage. Imagine him standing on the field of battle, having just cut off Goliath's head. Is there a better time to claim your throne? David does none of these things because he trusts God to work things out according to His will and His way and in His time.

So...do you trust God? Where are you trusting God in your life right now? Where is it hard to trust God? What hardships and struggles are you facing? What does trust look like for you in those specific situations? "Trusting God" is no an abstract concept but a way of life that finds concrete expression in the everyday.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 21-24, Psalm 91

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April 9, 2022

Godly Confidence

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 21-24, Psalm 91

Recently, I had the opportunity to lead a retreat for the leadership team of another church in a different community than my own. They are a great bunch of folks! They love God with all their hearts and are courageously seeking Him for the next season of their life together. They know the way forward won't be easy. They know they will have to navigate a lot of conflict. There are a lot of major decisions to be made and a lot could go wrong but they have taken the first steps of faith. It is inspiring! Over the course of the time we had together, I shared many of my own stories. Stories of the challenges I've faced. The conflict I've had to manage. The major decisions we've made in the church I lead and the risks we've taken for the Kingdom of God. One of the things that struck them most was my confidence. Confidence God would show up. Confidence God would provide. Confidence God would lead and guide every step of the way.

Godly confidence is not something we are born with. It is something we earn over a lifetime. Primarily through hardship and struggle. It is forged in the fires of adversity. It is tempered in times of trial. It is refined through seasons of suffering. I've had my share. I shared openly and honestly about those moments with my new friends and what I learned about God's faithfulness. When my life was at it's lowest possible point and I was in danger of losing everything and everyone I loved, God met me in a powerful way. He lifted me up out of the pit and set my feet on solid ground. I learned the truth of David's words from Psalm 91, "Because He holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him. I will protect him because he knows My name. When he calls to Me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him My salvation."

Once you hit rock bottom and find God waiting for you there, there isn't much that will shake you. My confidence does not come from the success we've had at PEPC or the fruitful initiatives I've been involved with in my denomination or the incredible work we've done through the Petros Network. It comes from watching God do His work through His people. It comes by having a front row seat to the movement of the Holy Spirit as He transforms so many lives. It comes through experiencing the sufficiency of the gospel over and over again despite my own foolishness and weaknesses. It comes as we take steps of faith, risking everything over and over again for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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April 11, 2022

Authentic Prayer

Readings for today: Psalms 7, 27, 31, 34, 52

The Psalms are the prayer book of the Bible. 150 prayers written by God's people. Written in times of celebration to commemorate great victories and triumphs. Written in times of grief to chronicle despair and exile and defeat. Written for use in worship like the Psalms of Ascent. Written for very specific occasions like when David sinned with Bathsheba. They are authentic and raw and real because they reflect real people bringing their deepest longings and questions and heartaches before God.

In today's selection, David is on the run. He is being pursued by his own people. Betrayed by his own king. Unjustly accused. He has lost his position. His home. His family. One would think such circumstances would lead to bitterness and despair. Anger and frustration. Fear and uncertainty. These are honest feelings and David doesn't shy away from acknowledging them. ""O Lord my God, in you do I take refuge; save me from all my pursuers and deliver me, lest like a lion they tear my soul apart, rending it into pieces, with none to deliver. (Ps. 7:1-2) "Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away." (Psalms 31:9-130) One can hear in his words the anguish and heartbreak. He is afraid. He doesn't know what the future holds. There are no guarantees he will escape. So he brings these feelings authentically before the Lord. He humbles himself before his God. He knows the Lord sees his afflictions.

At the same time, David prays in faith for his very real needs. He prays for God's protection. "In you, O Lord, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me! Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily! Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me!" (Psalms 31:1-2)

He prays for God's guidance and wisdom. "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple. For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock." (Psalms 27:4-5)

He prays for God's comfort and provision. "When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all." (Psalms 34:17-19)

Most of all, David lifts his eyes above his current circumstances to praise God for who He is! God is worthy of praise even when we find ourselves in the middle of the most difficult times of our lives. "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad. Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together!" (Psalms 34:1-3)

One of the greatest lies the enemy tries to tell us is that our needs don't matter to God. They are too small. Too insignificant to demand His attention. The enemy tries to convince us that we are a burden to our Heavenly Father and praying authentically somehow makes us unholy or unworthy. The Psalms teach us otherwise. They are raw. They are real. They are emotional. They are bold. The Psalmist - in

this case King David - enjoys such intimate fellowship with God that he can literally tell God anything. And that is what God desires from everyone of His children.

So what is your prayer life like? Is it real? Is it authentic? Or are there things you are afraid to share with your Heavenly Father? Areas of your life you try to hide? Do you fear coming into His presence? Afraid of what He might do? What He might say? What He might think? Do you trust God's gracious character? His unconditional love? Do you believe His mercies are new every morning? Do you believe God is generous towards you? Having an inexhaustible supply of time and attention? Do you know nothing is insignificant to God? Not one need. Not one desire. Do you bring your requests humbly before Him, trusting He knows best what you need? I'd encourage you to use the Psalms as a model, a guide, for your prayers. Let the Psalmist lead you to a deeper understanding of your relationship with God.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 56, 120, 140-142

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April 12, 2022

Resiliency

Readings for today: Psalms 56, 120, 140-142

One of the reasons I love reading the Bible chronologically is that it sets the Psalms in the context of the stories from which they arise. It's powerful when we connect them to the real lives of the real people who wrote them. Today's readings place us squarely in one of the darkest times of King David's life. He is on the run. He is living in the wilderness. He's gathered around him a pretty motley crew of people. He can never rest. He is never safe. He is never fully secure. Anxiety and fear are constant companions. This is not his fault. It's not something he brought on himself. He is not facing the consequences of his choices. No, it's the opposite. He is being unfairly treated. Falsely accused of crimes he did not commit. All David ever did was try and serve his king faithfully and well. He has fought for Saul. Bled for Saul. Won victory after victory for Saul. When Saul was troubled, it was David who played the harp to calm his soul. All for what? Betrayal? Being hunted like an animal?

How does David respond? Does he play the victim? No! He turns to God. "Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me; all day long an attacker oppresses me; my enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly. When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?...This I know, that God is for me. In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?" (Psalms 56:1-4, 9-11) This is what I love about David. He honestly acknowledges his fears. He doesn't try to pretend like life is going well. He's being trampled. He's being oppressed. He's being attacked by his enemies. David could respond in kind. David could give into fear. David could play the victim. He could rail against the betrayal and injustice of it all. But David does none of those things. Instead, he places his trust in God. He praises God. He keeps his eyes fixed on God. What happens as a result? David is filled with incredible confidence. "What can man do to me? Take my life? Take my future? Take my possessions? Big deal. I trust in God. I place my faith in God. I know God is for me so who can stand against me?"

We live in a world where it is common to play the victim. We seem to be unable to handle disappointment. We avoid responsibility. We blame-shift. We feel wounded. Hurt. Betrayed. This is not to suggest abuse isn't real. It absolutely is and cannot be tolerated. But, as a society, we are in danger of trivializing trauma, abuse, PTSD, etc. because we use these words to describe all kinds of conditions. Many of them self-inflicted. And we seemingly believe any kind of hurt gives us license to end relationships. Avoid hard conversations. Escape the Biblical call for forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration. Someone lets us down? We cut them out of our lives. We get confronted at work? We find another job. Someone holds us accountable? We stop talking to them. A friend hurts our feelings? We move on. Such behaviors are rampant both in our society and in the church. Study after study has been done on the lack of "resiliency" in our culture. We seem to be unable to handle suffering. Pain. Heartbreak. Disappointment. We seem to be ill-equipped to have hard, honest conversations. We seem to be too scared to face our own internal demons so we project them onto those around us. Especially those we are closest to. So marriages fail. Families break apart. Friendships end. All we are doing is perpetuating a cycle of brokenness.

Would that we would follow David's example! In the face of all the hardship and suffering and injustice and pain and disappointment and betrayal...David looked to God. He took refuge in God. He cried out to God. He asked God to search his own heart so that he may not sin. Most of all, he praised God for he recognized that it is often in the "wilderness" when we are "on the run" from our enemies

that God does His best work in us. Shaping. Forming. Forging our character. Making us into the people He created and called us to be.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 25-27, Psalms 17, 73

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April 13, 2022

Love your Enemies

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 25-27, Psalms 17, 73

This past week I read these challenging words again from the Sermon on the Mount. “Love your enemies!” Jesus says. “Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who persecute you.” (Luke 6:27-28) Frankly, I think it sounds crazy. Mixed up. Naive. Until I read about David. I watch him spare Saul’s life over and over again. I watch him refuse to lift his hand against the Lord’s anointed. I watch him restrain his anger. His desire for revenge. David had every right to strike Saul down when he caught him in the cave. He had every right to pin Saul to the ground with his own spear when he infiltrated the camp. But over and over again, David refused. Why is that?

I believe David understood on some level what Jesus would later teach. God’s great desire is for everyone to be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. (1 Tim. 2:4) This includes a man like Saul. Evil. Paranoid. Drunk with power. This includes a man like Nabal. Proud. Arrogant. Hard-hearted. This includes a man like David who will succumb later in life to the temptation to use his power for his own purposes. It includes a man like Doug Resler who wrestles everyday with pride and ego and selfishness. You see, the reality that David saw is the same reality Jesus taught which is that we are all enemies and yet God in His infinite mercy loved us. We are all sinners and yet God in His infinite grace embraced us. While we were yet broken. While we were weak and wounded. While we were dead in our sin. God came to us. God loved us. God did good to us. And we should do the same for others including even those who may be seeking our harm.

Some ask if such an approach runs the risk of further traumatizing victims of abuse. It’s a very important question. My response is that love is not passive. It doesn’t make one a doormat. I do not believe Jesus is teaching women to stay with men who beat them. I do not believe Jesus is teaching us to seek out situations where we would suffer. I do not believe Jesus is teaching us to simply bow our heads before injustice. David didn’t stay in Saul’s palace! David left. He escaped. He found his way to safety. And then he resisted. Fiercely. Faithfully. With the hope that his persecutor would eventually see the light. I love how Martin Luther King Jr. once put it, “Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.” King pursued a path of non-violent resistance always with the hope that white racists would become his brothers. This was his dream. And I believe deep down it was David’s dream for Saul as well.

How do you respond when attacked? How do you respond when people curse you? Do you respond in kind? Do you lash out in anger? Do you try to get even? What about those who’ve suffered abuse or trauma or been victims of injustice? These are very real experiences that cannot be diminished or dismissed. They impact so many in our culture today especially those in minority groups. Over the last few years, many of these groups have taken to the streets to plead their cause. They have created movements through social media to press their case. While we may agree or disagree with their political aims, is it not heartbreaking to see so many in our culture victimized by fear? Suffering at the hands of the principalities and powers in our society? Rather than condemn, can we not courageously enter into those dark places alongside them and meet them with the love of Christ?

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 35, 54, 63, 18

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April 14, 2022

God is our Helper

Readings for today: Psalms 35, 54, 63, 18

One of the more disappointing moments in my seminary career came during a preaching class. We were practicing delivering children's sermons and during the course of my presentation I made the statement that I believed God protects His children. The professor stopped the class. She asked me if I truly believed what I had just said. I told her I did. She asked how in the world I could believe that in a world where there is so much pain and suffering? How could I reasonably hold such a position in a world where children are abused and bullied, diagnosed with terminal diseases like cancer, or often die tragically. She asked me how I would feel if I told a child, "God would protect them" and then something bad happened. What would happen to that little child's faith? I have to admit I didn't have much to say. The whole conversation caught me completely off guard.

I've been in ministry for over twenty years now. I've walked with families through all kinds of pain and suffering. I've seen death up close. I've personally witnessed and experienced tragedy. I am not blind to the reality of abuse. I am not blind to the struggles so many face. Nor was David when he penned these words in the Psalms. "Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life...For he has delivered me from every trouble, and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies." (Psalms 54:4, 7) David knew pain intimately. Suffering was a constant companion. Death visited him regularly. This was the world in which he lived and yet he still looked to God for help. He still looked to God for protection and strength. Somehow, someway David was able to see beyond the horizons of this life to the life to come. He knew God could be trusted. He knew God was good. He knew God loved His people. And so he trusted God for His salvation even if it didn't come in this life. Now, to be clear, David knew nothing of resurrection. Heaven and the afterlife were not categories he would have thought in. But there was an instinct deep within his heart that drew him to God and caused him to trust in His great faithfulness.

Unfortunately, the horizons of our world have shrunk to the point where they only include the boundaries of this life. Even Christians have lost sight of eternity. We get so focused on what happens to us in this life that we lose sight of the bigger picture and greater glory God is working to reveal in us. We lose perspective. We want more from this world than it can actually give. We expect more from this world than it can actually deliver. And because our expectations go unmet. Because our desires go largely unrequited. Because our hopes and dreams fail. We get disappointed. Disillusioned. And we blame God. O that we would learn from David! Rather than blame God, we should look to Him for strength! Rather than rage at God, we should see Him as our helper! Rather than accuse God of not being fair or just or true to His Word, we should look beyond our circumstances, beyond our feelings, and see the eternity God is preparing for us in His Kingdom.

Psalm 18 is one of my favorites. I love the imagery of smoke and thunder and hail and God literally "bending the heavens" to come to our rescue. When things are at their worst, God is always at His best. When David teetered on the brink of death and destruction, God was there to pull Him back. And yet, we didn't read any of this in 1 Samuel, did we? I don't remember earthquakes and fire and God showing up in His chariot? What I remember is David faithfully placing His trust in God. What I remember is David literally making God His refuge. What I remember is David in prayer. David seeking God's face. David worshipping God even in the midst of His struggles. And because David did these things, his eyes pierced the veil of this world and God gave him a glimpse of what actually happened when he escaped from Saul.

In the midst of your struggles, do you seek God? When life is at it’s most difficult, we need to lean ever deeper into Christ. The disciplines of prayer, reading Scripture, and corporate worship become lifelines as we seek God’s face. Daily submission to the will of God as revealed in His Word is essential for the believer who makes God her/his help. Daily discernment between good and evil, truth and error, is essential for the believer who makes God her/his refuge. Daily self-denial and taking up our cross is essential for the believer who seeks to follow Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 28-31, 1 Chronicles 10

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April 15, 2022

Spiritual Warfare

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 28-31, 1 Chronicles 10

Last week, my wife and I attended a small group at our church who were grappling with the topic of spiritual warfare. We had a great evening discussing the book they had been reading and searching the Scriptures together. During the course of the evening, one person asked about the reality of ghosts and if we should be afraid of them. I immediately thought of the strange story of Saul and the witch of En-dor.

Fear makes us do funny things. Stoke up enough fear and we may even be willing to compromise some of our most deeply held convictions. In an earlier season of his life, Saul had been faithful to the Lord and had expelled all the mediums and necromancers out of the land. These were people who specialized in communing with the dead. They spoke to spirits. They regularly trafficked in the demonic. And Saul rightly drove them out. But now Samuel is dead. The Philistines have gathered against him. When Saul saw the size of their army, he became afraid so he turned to the Lord for help. But the Lord did not answer him. So Saul did what he always did. He went his own way. He sought out a medium to see if he would be victorious in the battle to come. He did not get the answer he wanted. The medium did indeed summon the ghost of Samuel who, in turn, gave Saul the bad news about his own death and the death of his sons. It was so terrifying Saul became paralyzed with fear and couldn't move. Eventually, the medium convinced him to eat and he was able to return back to his camp.

What do we learn from such a story? I think the main point is clear. Saul's chief sin was not calling up Samuel's ghost. It was abandoning the Lord. All of Saul's sins had now come home to roost and he would pay for his transgressions with his very life. Second, fear is a powerful motivator. It will cause us to do all sorts of things we wouldn't normally do. Saul would never have consulted a medium unless a mortal fear had taken hold of him. Third, ghosts are real. Spirits are real. But they do not aimlessly wander the earth. They are not cursed to haunt humankind. They have no power or authority that we need fear. Saul doesn't fear Samuel at all but rather the news Samuel brings.

As a culture, we seem somewhat obsessed with ghost stories. There's a city in my part of the country where you can go and take a "ghost tour" of the main building and grounds. They tell stories about the strange things that have taken place there over the years. Weird noises. Bumps in the night. Supposed apparitions that have appeared out of nowhere. All of it's nonsense according to Scripture and certainly nothing for any believer to be afraid of. 1 John 4:4 says, "Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world." In other words, because we have the Holy Spirit living inside us, we do not need to be afraid of anything in this world or the world to come. We do not need to fear principalities or powers or rulers or authorities or any spiritual forces of evil that might exist in the heavenly realm. We have Christ and He is more than enough to overcome anything that might come against us. This is the truth King Saul lost sight of in his fear. Be strong. Stand firm. Stay alert and trust God to protect you.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 121, 123-125, 128-130

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April 16, 2022

Lift Your Eyes!

Readings for today: Psalms 121, 123-125, 128-130

Psalms of Ascent. Many believe these were the songs Israel sang as they ascended to Jerusalem to keep the three annual festivals detailed in Deuteronomy 16. They are songs of worship. Songs of praise. Songs of thanksgiving. They express the deep gratitude the people feel towards God for all He has done for them. They sing them together. They sing them as they gather. One can almost imagine thousands coming to Jerusalem all singing these songs with one voice. It must have been a powerful, moving scene. In addition, many scholars believe these were the songs Israel sang at different high points in their history like the dedication of Solomon's Temple or the rebuilding of the walls during Nehemiah's time. Over and over again, Israel returned to these psalms to express their faith and trust in God.

Christians have built on this tradition of worship. Many churches throughout the world sing these psalms in worship. The Eastern Orthodox Church sings these psalms every Friday during Vespers. The Roman Catholic Church in the west schedules these psalms to be sung during daily prayer. The goal is to remind Christians we are on our own pilgrimage to a Heavenly Jerusalem and these psalms build the spiritual intensity of the worship service as we prepare for the reading of the gospel. It's a powerful thing to experience especially as we prepare for Easter.

Today we find ourselves reading these psalms on Holy Saturday. We've walked in Jesus' footsteps from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem to his last supper with his disciples to the crucifixion. Now his body lies in a tomb. The earth is dark and silent. The light of Christ has not yet dawned. But still we Christians sing. For we know things are darkest just before the dawn. We know what glory awaits us tomorrow morning! So we cry out with the Psalmist and all of God's people, "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." (Psalms 121:1-2) "To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens! Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he has mercy upon us." (Psalms 123:1-2) "Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore." (Psalms 125:1-2) Brothers and sisters, something happens to us when we gather together to sing God's praises. Something transformative. Something life-changing. Death has been defeated! Sin's reign has been broken! Evil will not win for Christ has risen! He has risen indeed!

This is the heart of why we worship. This is why gathering weekly with a community of believers is so vital to the Christian faith. Yes, I know many of us worship Jesus daily on our own. Yes, I know many of us experience Jesus profoundly as we hike or hunt or spend time in nature. But neglecting the worship of God with the people of God places us at risk. It places us out of step with thousands of years of Christian history. It places us out of step with the will of God as revealed in Scripture. It's frankly arrogant and prideful and foolish to claim we don't need the church. God loves His bride. God loves His children. God loves having His family together. God loves hearing His people sing. God loves meeting His people in the sacraments. God loves teaching His people through His Word. Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them." (Matthew 18:20) The Living Christ making His dwelling yet again among us.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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April 18, 2022

The Experience of Holy Saturday

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 1-4

My favorite part of Holy Week this year was Saturday. Strange, right? It's the day that often gets lost in the shuffle. It's the day of silence. The day where Jesus lay in the tomb. The day where nothing seems to be happening. If you're like me, you've never been quite sure what to do with this day. The roadmap for the rest of the week seems pretty clear. Palm Sunday is all about the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. Maundy Thursday focuses on the Last Supper, foot-washing, and the new commandment to love one another. Good Friday directs our attention to the cross and the death of our Savior. Easter Sunday is the glorious celebration of the resurrection. Against this backdrop, Saturday seems mundane. Ordinary. Like any other day. I'm never quite sure what to do with it. This year, however, was different. I found myself reflecting on the "pregnant pause" between crucifixion and resurrection. The questions such a pause evokes. The doubts one wrestles with when it feels like God is silent. The struggles we have when it feels like evil has won.

Then I read the passages for today. I struck me that all of life is a kind of "Holy Saturday" experience. For the Old Testament saints like David, they lived in the great "pause" between creation and consummation and they made the best of it. In many ways, David was a reflection of his culture. He was a tribal warlord who could be capricious and arbitrary and violent. He kills the messengers who bring him the news of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan and Ish-bosheth while giving Joab a pass for murdering Abner. At the same time, he also could be gentle and humble and tender-hearted. Consider the lamentation he composes for Saul and Jonathan. He honors them in death though Saul had become his mortal enemy. He even has it written down and taught to all of the people of Judah. The civil war after the death of Saul lasts two years and costs many their lives. It's a dark time in the nation's history though in the end David is confirmed in his kingship and unites God's people under his rule and reign. Such is life on Holy Saturday. It's messy. Broken. Violent. Filled with all kinds of pain and suffering. And yet God remains patient and faithful. He works all things according to His will for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

What about us? We live in the great "pause" between the first and second Advents. Christ has come. Christ has died. Christ has risen. The empty tomb fills us with hope. It is the sure and certain sign etched in human history for all to see that God has indeed broken the power of sin and death. He will not allow evil to have the final word. Justice will be done. Creation will be renewed. All things will be made new. This mortal life will put on immortality and we shall reign with Him forever. In the meantime, however, we should expect the world to reflect the messy reality of Holy Saturday. Caught in the silence between resurrection and final consummation, we should expect to see wars and hear rumors of wars. We should expect there to be pain and sorrow and suffering. We should expect to experience tragedies of various kinds as we wait for the final revelation of the Son of God. Does this mean things are hopeless? Does this mean we should give into despair? Not at all! God is still at work! He is still patiently, faithfully, lovingly working out His will even in the midst of our mess. Through it all, God's promise remains true. He will use all things - good things, bad things, even ugly things - for the good of those who love Him and who look to Him and who offer their lives back to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 6, 9-10, 14, 16, 21

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April 19, 2022

Emotional Roller Coaster

Readings for today: Psalms 6, 9-10, 14, 16, 21

I was born in Columbus, IN. One of my dreams as a young kid was to go to an amusement park outside of Cincinnati called King's Island and ride a famous rollercoaster there called the "Beast." When the Beast first debuted in 1979, it broke all existing records for the longest and fastest wooden rollercoaster in the world. The ride lasts more than four minutes and soars over 35 acres of wooded terrain. It has drops of 137 feet and 141 at extreme angles and has a 125 foot long underground tunnel. It reaches speeds of up to 65 MPH and has eight banked turns, some at 45 degrees. You can see why riding it would be every young boy's dream! Sadly, we never went to King's Island and I never got to fulfill my dream but I've loved rollercoasters to this day.

Reading the Psalms feels a bit like riding a rollercoaster. Today's selection begins in grief with David "flooding his bed" with tears. It moves to praise as David recounts all the "wonderful deeds" of the Lord. Back down to despair as David experiences the absence of God and feels abandoned in his "time of trouble." From there, David experiences conviction, realizing it is only the fool that says in his heart, "there is no God." And then to hope as David clings to faith, trusting God to be his "chosen portion and cup." Finally, David finishes with praise for who God is and what He has done. It's quite a ride.

Life can often feel like a rollercoaster and that's why the Psalms continue to resonate after all these years. They express the full range of human emotion and give us permission to approach God authentically and honestly and openly with our feelings. David approaches God with anger, frustration, hopelessness, fear, anxiety, depression and despair. He also approaches God with joy, excitement, trust, hope, deep faith and confidence. He never seems to be anyone but Himself before the Lord. This is perhaps what I love the most about him. I used to struggle to be "real" before God. I used to worry that if I didn't have the right words to say or approach God with the right attitude in my heart that I would be rejected or worse. But as I've traveled the rollercoaster that is my life and experienced all the ups and downs, the high peaks and low valleys, the sharp turns and drops that make me catch my breath; I've realized God has been sitting in the seat next to me the whole way. He knows my every thought and every feeling and He embraces me as I am.

It's two days post-Easter. If you're like me, the joy of that beautiful morning has already been challenged. Arguments at home. Family members in and out of the hospital. Dogs tearing up my backyard. Changes in carefully laid plans. The pressure of preparing for another Sunday. All of these things can stack up on me if I'm not careful. And the temptation I face in my own life is to stuff the feelings, put my head down, and plow forward. But that ignores the invitation of the Psalms. God wants me to bring all that I am feeling to Him. He wants me to continuously lay whatever burdens I may be carrying at His feet. Each and every morning I have the opportunity to come before Him to receive the strength I need for that particular day. Each and every evening, I have the opportunity to reflect back and thank Him for His provision. The key is approach Him honestly. Authentically. Openly. Holding nothing back. Let the One whose name is Faithful and True provide you with grace to meet your every need.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 1-2, Psalms 43-44

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April 20, 2022

Biblical Genogram

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 1-2, Psalms 43-44

The genogram is a tool that has become very popular in recent years. Invented by American psychiatrist Murray Bowen in the 1970's, it is designed to illuminate hereditary family patterns that are passed down to each generation. Those patterns can be positive or negative but they are often extremely helpful for individual who want to grow in their self-understanding as to why they think and feel and react the way they do. Families are emotional systems in which each individual plays a particular role. The more one understands the role they are called to play and why they are called to play it, the more they can help the system move towards greater health and wholeness. The less one understands about the role they play, the more apt they are to perpetuate it.

One can only imagine what might be revealed if we did a genogram of the first two chapters of 1 Chronicles! If you've been tracking with us through the Bible in a Year this year, you know the stories. They're not always pretty. It's one of the things I appreciate most about the Bible. It never seeks to white-wash any of the Old Testament saints. Their sinful tendencies are put on full display for all to see. Deception. Abuse. Violence. Suffering. Pain. Abandonment. Polygamy. Incest. It's all right there in the family tree. And yet God remains faithful. He chooses this particular people, despite their deep brokenness, to be His very own. They will bear the weight His glory. They will be entrusted with His Word. They will inherit the promises. They will be His covenant partners as He seeks to make Himself known to the world.

The same holds true for us today. I love how the Apostle Paul describes it in 2 Corinthians 4:7, "For we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." We are all jars of clay. Cracked and chipped in many places by the things we've experienced in this world. Into our hearts, God has deposited the treasure of the gospel and His desire is to make Himself known in us and through us despite our deep brokenness. It is through the cracks of our lives that God's light shines. It is in the mess of our lives that God meets us. He is not afraid to call His own. He is not afraid to adopt us as His sons and daughters. He is not afraid to make us covenant partners in the great work He is doing to reach the world with His message of grace, hope, and love.

All of us are products of the family system that produced us. All of us are shaped - good, bad, and otherwise - by the interactions we have with the generations who've gone before us and the ones who come after us. All of us have a role to play in our family system and the more we allow Christ to transform us in that role, the more we can leverage it to help our family system become a greater reflection of the gospel.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 49, 84-85, 87

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April 21, 2022

God's Extravagant Gifts

Readings for today: Psalms 49, 84-85, 87

Recently, my wife and I were reflecting back on our life together. We've been married almost 26 years. Been together almost 30. We've raised four kids together. We've lived all over the country. We've traveled to many faraway places. Done ministry in all sorts of contexts. We've been rich and we've been poor. We've had good times and bad times. We've experienced deep intimacy and deep brokenness. But perhaps the thing that struck us most as we looked back was the the extravagant goodness of God. He has given us so many gifts over the years. Gifts we did not deserve. Gifts we could never earn. And as we reflected on these gifts, we found ourselves experiencing a range of emotions. Shock. A little embarrassment. Humility. Followed by a deep and profound sense of gratitude and thankfulness.

In this is love...not that we loved God but that He loved us. (1 John 4:10) God is the most extravagant giver of all time. His mercies are new every morning. Manna appearing each and every day. He throws open the storehouses of heaven in order to care for those He loves. I love how Psalm 85 puts it, "Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him, that glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs up from the ground, and righteousness looks down from the sky. Yes, the Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him and make his footsteps a way." (Psalms 85:9-13) Surely we do not deserve such divine attention! Surely we have not earned such divine blessing! Surely we are not worthy of such an honor and yet God's love remains. He gives what is good. He causes the land to yield it's increase. His salvation comes to those who fear Him. His glory fills the earth. God is vigilant. Always watching. Always on the lookout. He never sleeps. He never rests. He never takes a day off. He is always there for us. He is at work when there is scarcity and when there is abundance. He is at work when the outlook is good and the forecast sunny and He is at work when things are trending downward and it looks like rain.

I know it's easy to question such goodness. We look around at the world and we see the starvation. The poverty. The disease. The death. We wonder where God is in the midst of it all. The Bible's answer is clear and unequivocal. He is there. Right in the middle of it all. Right in the thick of things. Saving. Securing. Providing. Comforting. Rescuing people from the bondage of sin and death in this world in order to bring them home to Himself. He's also at work in us. Those who have plenty. Those who have abundance. Those who are healthy and strong and blessed with tremendous resources. He moves on our hearts. He moves in our lives. He propels us out to the ends of the earth to be His hands and feet. What a marvelous thing it is to be invited to partner with God's Spirit in what God is doing to save the world!

It is humbling. It is a little embarrassing. Certainly shocking that God would choose me. But I am overwhelmed by a deep and profound sense of gratefulness and thankfulness. I do not deserve this honor. I have done nothing to earn it. I am unworthy in every which way. But God is gracious. And God's love for me remains. Thanks be to God for His inexpressible gift! (2 Corinthians 9:15)

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 3-5

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April 22, 2022

Communion of Saints

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 3-5

There is an old story about a pastor who went to visit a parishioner whom he had not seen for a while. It was a cold morning so when the pastor showed up, the man had the coffee hot and a roaring fire going in the fireplace. They both sat down and the pastor asked how things were going. The conversation ranged from work to family to health to life in general. The man was doing well. Finally, the conversation got around to faith. And the man started to talk about how he didn't need the church to worship God. He was doing just fine on his own. Praying. Reading the Bible. Walking through the woods. As he spoke, the pastor didn't judge. Didn't condemn. He simply reached over and with the tongs, took a coal out of the fireplace and placed it on the hearth. As the man spoke, his eyes kept going to the coal. At first it burned nice and hot but as time went on it began to grow cold. Having lost it's connection to the fire, it eventually burned out.

Life with God is like that. Life with community is like that. I can't tell you the number of people I have spoken with over the last two years who've experienced this loss of connection. Pre-COVID, their lives were so busy. They were pulled in so many different directions. They didn't have time to build deep, spiritual friendships. Once COVID hit and life locked down, they had nowhere to turn. No one to call when they were struggling. No one to lean on when times got tough. The result was isolation and loneliness. Feelings of depression and despair. They tried to medicate with alcohol or marijuana or opioids but those things only provided temporary relief. They desperately needed to rekindle their relationship with God and His people.

The people of God have always drawn so much strength from one another. The people of God have always felt this strong connection both to those who came before them and to those who come after. The genealogies of the Bible may seem dry and boring at first glance. Just a bunch of names on a page. And yet each person represents a story. Each person represents a connection to God and His promises. Each person has a testimony to share about the faithfulness of God in action. Maybe it's Jabez who prayed to God for protection. Or Reuben who experienced the loving discipline of God for his mistakes. Or Judah who experienced the grace of God covering His sin. Over and over again, these names tell a story. The story. Our story. This is our family history. Our family tree. And as we tap into this story, we experience a deep connection to the One who made us. The One who loves us. The One who has come to rescue us.

How are you connecting to God today? How are you connecting to God's people? How are you helping others connect? It's not complicated. All it takes is the discipline of time and effort. As life begins to ramp back up against now that we are emerging from the COVID crisis, we have the opportunity for a reset. We have the chance to chart a new course. Intentionally set some new patterns in our lives so that deep, spiritual friendships can form. If you need help, I always recommend the following four spiritual practices to those who wonder how to begin building connection with God and others…

Daily Devotional Time: Spend time each day in prayer and reading/reflecting on Scripture. Find fifteen minutes, twenty minutes, even thirty minutes or more just to be with God. Use your commute. Use your lunch hour. Use your break time. You won't regret it.

Weekly Gathered Worship: Find a local church and plug in. This is especially true in the new era of online worship. Make sure to gather in-person as much as possible with God's people for worship each

week. Don’t approach it as a consumer experience (i.e. what did I “get out” of it today) but rather trust God to create a “cascading” effect in your life on a subconscious level as you commit to worship Him on a weekly basis.

Join a small group: Find a few Christian friends and start meeting together intentionally for encouragement, vulnerable sharing, and accountability. Pray for each other. Talk to each other. Intentionally do life together. Will it be messy? Yep. Pursuing authentic relationships always is because we are all “authentically” sinful! :-) Press through the difficult conversations. Practice forgiveness and grace. You will find deep connections building as you do.

Find a place to serve God’s Kingdom: Don’t just build this “connection” for yourself! Find a way to share it with others. As you go out to serve Christ and His Kingdom, you will become someone else’s point of connection to God and to community. Isn’t that awesome? God will use YOU to be His hands and feet in another person’s life.

Do these four things over the course of a lifetime and I can pretty much guarantee you will grow a deep, abiding relationship with God and with His people. Will there be disappointments along the way? Yes. Will you feel hurt at times? Absolutely. Is it easy? Nope. Not in our world. But nothing worth doing is ever easy and that is particularly true when it comes to the most important relationship in our lives! So place your trust and your hope in Christ and let Him lead you to the abundant life He promises!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 6, Psalms 36, 39, 77-78

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April 23, 2022

Evangelism

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 6, Psalms 36, 39, 77-78

I once worked for a denomination where evangelism was often referred to as the "E" word. It was a perjorative term. They didn't like it. Didn't want to do it. Didn't really believe it necessary on some level. They would much rather focus on social issues and lobby for certain political progressive positions. But talk about Jesus? Share the gospel? That was a non-starter. Every few years, they would produce a survey and at least a few of the questions focused on whether or not belief in Jesus was required for salvation. A majority of pastors and denominational leaders voted "no." When asked if they had shared their faith with a non-believer in the last year, most of the people sitting in the pew said "no." Of course, things aren't much different in my current denomination. While everyone acknowledges the call to evangelize, very few actually put it into practice. 80-85% of our churches have plateaued or are in decline. In a recent survey it was revealed that far too many pastors do not spending any time at all sharing the good news with lost people outside of Sunday mornings. Sure, we may have a better handle on our theology but we still seem to suffer from the same spiritual malaise.

Psalm 78 says, "We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done. He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments..." (Psalms 78:4-7) It is God's greatest desire to be known. To be loved. To be in relationship with His people. It's why He walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden. It's why He revealed Himself to Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It's why He spoke to Moses from a burning bush. It's why He delivered Israel with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. It's why He sends prophets, raises up kings, and, in the fullness of time, sends His only begotten Son into the world. He wants to be known!

The primary instrument He uses to make Himself known is us! His chosen people! His adopted sons and daughters! His bride! His body! His church. It's why every gospel contains a Great Commission. It's why the Book of Acts begins with a command to go to the ends of the earth with the message of the gospel. It's good news! It's great news! It's the best news!

Evangelism begins in the home. With our children. Our children's children. One generation tells the next of the mighty and awesome wonders of God. One generation testifies to the next of all that God has done. Fathers and mothers sharing the good news with their children over dinner. Driving in the car to the next practice. Prayers before bedtime. Grandfathers and grandmothers sharing the good news with their grandchildren as they take them to the zoo. For a walk in the park. Playing with them on the playground. Families worshipping together. Reading Scripture together. Praying together. This is how the faith is passed on. But it doesn't end in our homes. It extends outward to our neighbors as we engage in acts of service and selfless love. It extends to our co-workers as we connect over coffee breaks and at lunch. It extends to our classmates at recess or on off-periods together. It extends to those we encounter as we go about our daily lives. A smile. A kind word. Graciously letting someone go in front of us in the line at the grocery store. It extends even further as we engage cross-culturally both locally and abroad. As we serve the less fortunate. Speak for those who have no voice. Care for those who are hurting. Comfort those who are sick. Come alongside those who are lonely. All in the name of Jesus.

A favorite theologian of mine once said, “Christians should all live questionable lives.” Not because we engage in sin but because our lives should be such models of grace and unconditional love that it will make people curious. It will make them want to ask us why we live the way we do. This should be true of our children as they grow up in our homes. True for our neighbors who live around us. True for our co-workers and classmates with whom we spend so much time.

So who do you know who needs the gospel? What are you doing to share the good news with them? Are you praying for them? Are you looking for opportunities to engage in spiritual conversations with them? Are you serving them? Blessing them? Have you invited them to join you in worship? Or in small group? Or on a mission? God desires all should be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. And to accomplish this great mission, God has sent you. God has sent me. God has sent His people into the world.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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April 25, 2022

The Dark Night of the Soul

Readings for today: Psalms 81, 88, 92-93

Spiritual crisis is real. The consistent witness of God's people throughout history testifies to the fact that there will be seasons when God seems so distant. When our lives seem so dark. When the light of Christ is hard to find. When the comfort of Christ seems long in coming. During such seasons, we feel overwhelmed by fear. Doubt. The cares and worries of this world press in on us. We feel trapped. Alone. Unable to be consoled.

St. John of the Cross, a 16th century Spanish Christian, famously coined the term, "The Dark Night of the Soul." It refers to particular seasons in the Christian life where we feel stripped of God's presence. It's not true, of course. God is still very much present in our lives but we do not feel Him. We do not experience Him. We do not sense His tender mercies and affections. During such seasons, we feel a void. An absence. And it causes us to wrestle on a deep, foundational level with our faith.

I experienced such a season for 19 months while living in Sun Prairie, WI. The ministry I had been called to was failing. My relationship with those I was accountable to was a disaster. I was struggling daily with fear and doubt and depression. So consumed was I by my own needs, I neglected my wife and children. Things got so bad that my wife gave me an ultimatum. It was either her or the ministry. I was at the end of my rope. I resigned. No idea what was next. No idea how I would feed my family. No idea how I would care for those I loved most in this world. I felt so alone. So afraid. For months I cried out to God. I would pace our living room most of the night praying. Begging. Frustrated. Angry. Where was God when I needed Him most? Where was God when things were at their worst? I was in spiritual crisis and it felt like God was not there.

These experiences are not unusual. St. John of the Cross. St. Paul of the Cross. Mother Theresa. All testify to similar experiences, though their "dark nights" lasted decades. The author of Psalm 88 was clearly familiar with his own "dark night." "O Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you...For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol...You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep...Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon? Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?...O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?...You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness." (Psalms 88:1, 3, 6, 11-12, 14, 18) It's a depressing Psalm. One of the few with no resolution. No final ascription of praise. The psalmist seemingly feels God's absence on a visceral level and is left all alone in darkness.

So why does God allow the dark night of the soul? Why does God not rescue us from the depths of our spiritual crises? What are such experiences seemingly so common and even necessary for the Christian? I believe it is how we learn the meaning of true faith. True faith must move from the head to the heart to the gut. To the depths of our being. It must become the fundamental reality of our existence. It must transcend what we think. It must transcend what we feel. It has to come from a place so deep within that it can never be overcome.

Mother Theresa endured her "dark night" from 1948 until her death in 1997. She once wrote, "Where is my faith? Even deep down ... there is nothing but emptiness and darkness ... If there be God—please forgive me. When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those

very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul." Some have suggested she lost her faith. Not true! In fact, her suffering was very much like that of Jesus on the cross who cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In the end, Mother Theresa hoped her personal letters would be destroyed lest "people think more of me and less of Jesus."

I wouldn't trade those 19 months of spiritual darkness in Wisconsin for anything. God had removed any sense of His affections. God had removed any sense of His abiding presence. Doubts and fears assailed my soul as I was stripped to the bone. In the depths of my despair, I was haunted by this one question...do I really believe? Do I believe in God when nothing makes sense? Do I believe in God when I cannot feel His presence? Do I believe in God when all is darkness all around me? Is God more real to me than my thoughts? My feelings? My fears? My doubts?

There's no way to know the answer to such deep questions unless one is willing to walk through the valley of the shadow of death to the other side. Thankfully, at the end of my own dark road, I found God waiting for me there. I found my faith renewed and strengthened in a way I could never have imagined. And I do not harbor any illusions that somehow my journey is at its end or that I won't have to walk yet another dark road in the course of my life. What I do know is that God has driven my faith deep into my gut. Deep into the bedrock of my being. And though it can be shaken, it can never be destroyed because God is more real than my circumstances. God is more real than my feelings. God is more real than my thoughts. God is more real than my doubts. God is more real than my fears. God is the fundamental reality of my life and I am thankful.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 7-9

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April 26, 2022

Cultural History and Identity

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 7-9

The key verse in today's reading is 1 Chronicles 9:1, "So all Israel was recorded in genealogies, and these are written in the Book of the Kings of Israel. And Judah was taken into exile in Babylon because of their breach of faith." Why are all these names important? Why are the generations laid down with such detail and specificity? Why record Israel according to their respective tribes? What's at stake here? Identity. Connection. History. Israel took their history seriously. Even after they were carted off to exile in Babylon and were faced with the temptation to intermarry and lose their connection to their past, Israel remained faithful. They knew God had set apart the Levites to serve Him as priests. So the Levites remained set apart as priests even in exile. They knew God had given authority to the tribe of Judah to reign and to rule. So the tribe of Judah continued to serve as princes and leaders for God's people. They knew David and Samuel had set apart certain families as gatekeepers, guardians of the Lord's treasury, etc. So they made sure these families retained those roles. And when Israel finally did return from exile, you see the descendents of these great men and women re-connecting to their glorious past.

Most of us have never experienced exile. Most of us have not had our cultural identities wiped out. We've not had our history erased. We've not had our connection to our ancestors severed. At the same time, many among us have had this terrible and tragic experience. I think of the Native American men and women I have known. Their people lived on this continent for hundreds of years before the arrival of the first European explorers. They lost their land. They were forcibly relocated. They were forced to forgo the key rituals and give up the key rhythms that connected them to their history and their tribal identity. Their stories are terrible and heartbreaking. I think of the African-American men and women I have known. Their ancestors brought over on slave ships across the Atlantic. Their connection to their land severed. Their connection to their history erased. Their connection to their past lost. They were given new names. They were forced to take on new identities. They suffered in slavery for hundreds of years including economic slavery after officially being emancipated during the Civil War. Their stories are terrible and heartbreaking.

It's vital for those of us who have not suffered at the scale of others to humble ourselves and listen to those who have endured such pain and loss. It is important for us to become advocates for them as they seek to recover their cultural identity. We must become allies with them in their fight to re-connect to their cultural past. We must pluck up the courage to face the difficult and complex issues that often arise as a result.

I certainly don't pretend to have all the answers. I know the way forward is difficult. But I have to believe as we work for the good of one another. As we celebrate the history and culture and diversity God has created among human beings on this planet. As we help each other re-connect to something deeper. A deeper identity. A deeper story. A deeper truth. I have to believe God will reveal Himself in that process in a powerful way because this "genealogical impulse" exists within all of us. In a very real sense, Israel's story is our story for all of us can ultimately trace our lineage back to the same common source. Adam and Eve. The first man. The first woman. Made in the image of God by the hand of God for the glory of God. This is truly our heritage.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 5:1-10, 1 Chronicles 11-12, Psalms 133

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April 27, 2022

The Power of Unity

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 5:1-10, 1 Chronicles 11-12, Psalms 133

Psalm 133 is my favorite Psalm. Mainly because I have seen it in action. I have seen what happens when God's people truly serve Him with one heart and mind. I have witnessed the miracles that take place when God's people put aside their egos, their needs, their wants, their desires in favor of serving the Kingdom. I have watched God's Spirit move when God's people humble themselves. Deny themselves. Pursue forgiveness and reconciliation. Lay aside their need to be safe, both physically and emotionally. It is powerful. Life-changing. It transforms villages. Towns. Cities. Entire tribes, regions, and nations.

We see this on display especially in our readings today about King David and his mighty men. It's powerful to watch God unite the hearts of men as they gather around David. They defend him with their lives against overwhelming odds. They take great risks like invading an enemy camp to bring him a drink of water. They achieve incredible feats of valor in order to win David his kingdom. Over and over they declare their allegiance. "We are yours, O David!" "We are your bone and flesh!" "You are our shepherd and prince!" The result is a powerful wave of national unity. "All these, men of war, arrayed in battle order, came to Hebron with a whole heart to make David king over all Israel. Likewise, all the rest of Israel were of a single mind to make David king."

True biblical unity requires us to relinquish "self" in favor of others. It requires us to lose our individual identity in favor of the whole. It requires us to consider others more important than ourselves. It requires us to risk. Risk being hurt. Risk being wounded. Risk feeling rejected. It requires us to have courage. Courage to forgive. Courage to pursue reconciliation. No matter what the cost. No matter how many times we get burned. It requires honesty. Transparency. Self-reflection.

True biblical unity requires the church to lay aside it's need to compete. Extend it's brand. Criticize other parts of the Body as if "we have no need of them." It requires leadership to get serious about working together. Working with and for one another. Willing to sacrifice our buildings, budgets, and attendance in order to expand God's Kingdom into the communities where we serve. It requires mutual submission and accountability. A willingness to step aside and relinquish our platforms when we fall into sin. It requires a radical commitment to love God and neighbor at the expense of our organizations and institutions. Self-denial and picking up our cross is not just a call to the individual Christian but to the church as a community as well!

True biblical unity requires a radical re-orientation of the heart. It is incredibly difficult and challenging which is why it happens so infrequently in Scripture. The unity David experiences as he builds his kingdom will soon give way to division as his own children betray him. We have to constantly be on guard because we are our own worst enemy. Our hearts naturally resist unity because it requires literal death to self. And we have such a strong instinct for self-preservation.

Ultimately, unity is not something we can achieve through our own strength. It must be a movement of God's Spirit. "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Cor. 12:13) Have you drunk of the one Spirit? Have you tasted the goodness and glory of God? Are you walking with the Spirit? Keeping in step with Him in all your ways? Unity comes as we relinquish more and more of our lives to the Spirit's control. Both as individuals and as churches gathered in His name.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 5:11-6:23, 1 Chronicles 13-16

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April 28, 2022

Worship

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 5:11-6:23, 1 Chronicles 13-16

What is true worship? It is the worship God both deserves and demands. Believe it or not, God cares deeply how He is worshipped. In 1 Chronicles 13, we see what happens when God's people - with sincere and authentic devotion in their hearts - fail to worship God in the way He commands. The people have gathered. They're excited to bring the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. They call the priests. They call the Levites. They plan a huge celebration. The whole nation is present to witness this incredible moment. They build a new cart to carry the ark in the procession. David and all of Israel are celebrating, singing, dancing before the Lord with all their might. But then an ox stumbles. Uzzah, seeking to protect the ark, puts out his hand to keep it steady. The Lord strikes him down. One can imagine the shock of the crowd. In an instant, all the music and dancing and celebration stops. Silence. Long, prolonged, awkward silence as the people come to grips with what's just happened. David is angry. He pouts for three months, refusing to come to grips with the fact that he himself is somewhat responsible for what happened. His decision to do what was convenient (build a cart to carry the ark) rather than what God demanded (Levites carry the ark on their own shoulders) is ultimately what cost Uzzah his life. Fast forward to 1 Chronicles 15. A different picture emerges. David is ready. He is humble. He submits to God's will. He decrees that "no one but the Levites may carry the ark of God, for the Lord had chosen them to carry the ark of the Lord and to minister to him forever." (1 Chron. 15:2) Once again, the celebration commences. Singing. Dancing. Music. Right sacrifices. God is pleased. God accepts the worship David offers because it is singularly focused on honoring God.

What does true worship look like in our context today? Obviously, none of us know where the Ark of the Covenant resides. (Except Indiana Jones, of course!) The ceremonial laws that governed Old Testament worship have been fulfilled in Christ. Does this set us free then to worship as we choose? To do what feels good? To set the needs of the worshipper above the clear, biblical command to worship God and Him alone? I don't think so. So what then is true worship? Is it a feeling? A style? An experience? And how do we know if we've engaged in true worship? Is it because we leave feeling inspired? The preacher's message warmed our hearts? We've eaten the bread and drunk of the cup? The music for the morning matched our musical tastes? What are the hallmarks of true worship? Authenticity? Sincerity? Sentimentality?

Sadly, worship in 21st century North America has turned largely inward. It is focused, evaluated, planned, and produced for the human experience. It caters to the preferences and tastes of the worshipper. It is designed primarily to make the human being feel inspired, motivated, and connected. This "inward turn" is as true for the small church as it is for the mega-church and every church in between. And it's why we see so many Christians bounce from church to church to church over the course of their lives. Long gone are the days when one would invest their entire lives into one community come hell or high water. Long gone are the days when Christians would heed the biblical command to actually practice forgiveness and reconciliation when relationships get hard. Long gone are the days when Christians would die to self, laying aside the consumer tendencies of taste and personal preference. As a result, long gone are the days when the church produced robust, courageous, bold, self-sacrificing disciples of Jesus who would give their lives for the sake of the gospel and the Kingdom of God in this world. Not that it never happens, it is simply more of an exception than a rule.

Today's passage challenges all of us. It challenges me as a pastor to think deeply about the primary thrust of my worship planning. Am I seeking to bring God glory and honor or am I seeking to meet the

needs of God’s people? When I evaluate worship, what do I measure? Attendance? The emotional engagement of God’s people? How many times they say amen? ;-) Or am I more focused on the clarity of the gospel message as it was proclaimed through music, Word, and sacrament? It challenges you as a worshipper to think deeply about your own goals in worship. Why do you come? Is it to get something out of the experience? Is it to feel emotionally uplifted and encouraged? Do you evaluate worship based on how much you liked the music or the preaching? Or do you come to bring God glory and honor? Do you come with a heart to offer yourself as a living sacrifice before Him? Friends, our primary duty in worship is clear…we are to worship God and enjoy Him forever. This, in fact, is the chief end of our existence.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 15, 23-25, 47

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April 29, 2022

Integrity

Readings for today: Psalms 15, 23-25, 47

Recently, a friend of mine went through a job change. He was notified he would be let go because his company was “going in a different direction.” The news came out of the blue. All of his performance reviews had been exceptional. He hit every mark the company ever set for him and often exceeded them. None of that seemed to matter. The boss just wanted to make a change. As you can imagine, he went through a range of emotions. There was the initial shock when he first got the news. Shock gave way to anger as he wrestled with the injustice of it all. Anger turned to frustration as he processed the years he had given to this company. Frustration became hurt as he realized how deeply this decision wounded him. In the midst of his hurt, he felt fear and anxiety rise up as he pondered what he would do next. Starting a job search at his age and station in life was no easy task. Would he be able to replace his income? Would he be able to provide for his family? He was pretty close to retirement so how many years did he really have left? I imagine many of us have gone through these experiences ourselves or walked through them with those we love. It’s not easy.

The temptation, of course, is to retaliate. To get back at those who’ve hurt us. To justify our anger and frustration and lash out. We might work to undermine. We might spread rumors or gossip about those in positions above us. We might seek to recruit others to our cause and create all kinds of conflict in the office on our way out. Sow seeds of discontent. Exploit opportunities to create dissension. Those kinds of things. Some might even take things to an extreme and try to take the company or the person responsible down with them. It can get ugly.

“What would God have me do?” This is the question my friend asked me. I took him to some of the Psalms we read today. I pointed him beyond his circumstances and challenged him to think about the bigger picture. Do you want the blessing of God on your life? Do you want the favor of God to go before you? Do you want to walk before God with a clean conscience and a pure heart? Then walk as blamelessly as possible. Do what is right. Don’t give in to the temptation to slander or return evil for evil. Remain humble. Stay focused on Jesus. Trust God is sovereign over all things - including injustice - and nothing can stand in the way of His will for your life.

The ultimate test of faith is what happens when we come face to face with a circumstance that is unjust or unfair. In those moments, we are faced with a choice to either “walk our talk” or go our own way. If we can keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. If we can keep our minds set on eternal rewards. If our treasures are truly in heaven, we will find ourselves looking to please God rather than man and this is the essence of godly integrity.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 89, 96, 100-101, 107

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April 30, 2022

Our God Is Too Small

Readings for today: Psalms 89, 96, 100-101, 107

Our God is far too small. The human mind is simply too finite to fully comprehend the height and depth and breadth of His majesty and glory and splendor. His wisdom is higher than our wisdom. His ways are higher than our ways. His power is limitless. His knowledge unsearchable. His love unconditional. His grace knows no ends. There are no boundaries to God. No barriers. Nothing He cannot do. Nothing He cannot accomplish. Nothing stands outside His will. Nothing opposes Him. Nothing threatens Him. Nothing can move Him. "For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord? Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord..." (Psalms 89:6)

Our God is far too small. In an effort to understand Him, we tend to cut Him down to our size. Reduce Him to a much more manageable state. We question His goodness. We question His omnipotence. We question His wisdom. Rather than stand on the truth that we are made in God's image, we reverse engineer the process. We remake God in our image to our everlasting regret. For the god we "make" is an idol. Weak. Empty. Imperfect. A god who can do nothing, see nothing, accomplish nothing. A god who cannot be trusted or relied upon in the most difficult of circumstances. A god who is helpless in the face of our suffering. A few years back, a friend of mine rehashed an old argument on suffering. She wrote, "We have three options in the face of real suffering. 1) God is not good. 2) God is not loving. 3) God is not all-powerful." Her argument is that surely a good and loving and all-powerful God would not allow suffering in the world therefore we must question either His goodness, His love, or His power. But this is a false premise. This is an argument made without all the facts. We see from such a limited perspective. Her god is too small.

Consider for a moment what my friend is really asking. If God had chosen to remove suffering and pain from the world at the beginning of time. If, even after Adam and Eve fell into disobedience, God would not allow human beings to suffer the consequences of the choices they made; what would that do to free will? What would that do to human agency? What would that do to human choices? It would destroy them. We would never grow into maturity. Never become the partners God created us to be. And even more fundamentally, it wrecks the whole purpose of the Cross. If suffering and pain is always evil and therefore always to be avoided and always wrong, then the suffering and pain and death of Jesus also falls into that category as well. Perhaps God is bigger than we realize?

Our God is far too small. And that is why we need to immerse ourselves in God's Word. God's Word clearly proclaims the goodness and love and power of God. "O Lord God of hosts, who is mighty as you are, O Lord, with your faithfulness all around you?...The heavens are yours; the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it, you have founded them....You have a mighty arm; strong is your hand, high your right hand. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you." This is our God! The Glory of Israel! He is mighty to save! Mighty to deliver! Faithful in love! Over and over again, our God declares His love for His people. Never leaving them. Never forsaking them. Even when we run from Him, He will relentlessly pursue. Even when we reject Him, He will never abandon us. "My steadfast love I will keep for him forever, and my covenant will stand firm for him. I will establish his offspring forever and his throne as the days of the heavens...Blessed be the Lord forever! Amen and Amen." (Psalms 89:8, 11, 13-14, 28-29, 52)

Friends, there is only one way to see God for who He truly is. Only one way to know God on His terms. First, we must trust His revelation of Himself. We must look to Jesus in whom the fullness of

God was pleased to dwell. He is the pre-eminent and unique and complete revelation of the One True God. Second, we must trust His Word. The Word of God is the unique and authoritative witness to the truth of God. We must trust God's Word and lean not on our own limited understanding. We must trust God's Word more than what we think or how we feel. We must believe God is who He declares Himself to be or we have so little hope.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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May 2, 2022

The Deep Work of the Spirit

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 17, Psalms 1-2, 33, 127, 132

One of the things you notice when you read the Bible year after year is that some of the same issues tend to pop up. The Holy Spirit uses His Word to reveal deep character flaws that must be addressed. For example, every time I read Psalm 127, I am reminded of one of my greatest struggles which is my desire to be successful. To make my life count. To do something significant. To strive to be the best. These values were ingrained in me from an early age. They are not necessarily bad in and of themselves. The problem is I too often let these good things become ultimate things in my life. I start to pursue success at the expense of my relationship with God or those I love. I focus on the future rather than finding contentment in the present. I covet what I don't have rather than be thankful for what I do have.

Several years ago, the Lord spoke to me during a time of prayer. It wasn't an audible voice or a lightning bolt from heaven or anything like that. It was simply an impression in my heart. A feeling in my gut. A few random thoughts in my head that suddenly coalesced into a message I needed to hear. It was a short message. Three simple words. Obscurity. Anonymity. Insignificance. I was journaling and these three words started ringing over and over again in my head. Obscurity. Anonymity. Insignificance. Over the years I've learned to pay attention to these kinds of things in my prayer time so I sat back from my keyboard and asked the Lord to give me further insight into what He was saying. God said, "I want you to labor in obscurity. Embrace anonymity. Pursue insignificance." To be honest, my first thought was "No way!" However, after pondering the message for a few days, I realized what God was doing. The Holy Spirit was about to do some deep work in my heart. Work that would turn me around and inside out and upside down. It was life-changing work that would shift my perspective eternally.

"Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." King David has a desire to build God a house. It's a godly desire. A good desire. One that is affirmed by Nathan the prophet. But it is not the Lord's will. "But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan, "Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the Lord: Would you build me a house to dwell in?...'Thus says the Lord of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." (2 Samuel 7:4-5, 8-13) I love how God flips the tables on David here. It is not David who will build God a house but God who will build David a house! It is not David who will make His own name great but God who will make David's name great!

Unless God builds the house. Unless God builds David's house. Unless God builds our house. We all labor in vain. This was essentially the message God was sending me during my devotional time. I was spending so much energy working so hard to be successful. To stand out among my peers. To be faithful to God. And all the while God was calling me to rest. To trust. To stand back and let Him do the

“building” of my life. Let Him guide and direct my path. Let Him have the glory for the success I was seeking to achieve.

I’ve learned a lot over the years about the meaning of those three, God-given words. They no longer feel unnatural. No longer feel like they’re cutting against the grain of my life. In fact, I not only have learned to accept them but to embrace them as a way of life for myself.

Obscurity - I love where I am. I love the church family I get to serve. I love the team of leaders I get to serve alongside. We are gospel-centered. We bear Kingdom-fruit. We have a global reach. We are reaching the lost. We are serving the underserved. We truly are seeking to be the hands and feet of Jesus in our community and around the world. And yet we are obscure. We are not the biggest or fastest growing or most “successful” church around. We simply do the work God has called us to day in and day out. It’s awesome.

Anonymity - No one knows my name. I have no platform. No influence. No power. I am simply a pastor. One beggar telling another where to find bread. I have no need to build a brand. I do not aspire to high position. My goal is simply to preach the gospel, die, and be forgotten.

Insignificance - The reality is I will be completely forgotten within a generation or so of my death. My own family won’t remember who I was or what I did. All my accomplishments and achievements will quickly turn to dust. And that’s okay. Because my significance is not found in what I do but in who God is and I am content simply to serve Him in whatever way He sees fit.

Friends, I wish I could describe the blessings that flow when you truly let go of the need to build your own house and instead turn your plans over to God. I wish I could describe the joy and peace that I wake up with every morning because I no longer find myself striving so hard to make my own way in the world. I wish I could describe the intimacy of the relationships I’ve forged with my wife and children and church family. It’s truly incredible. All because I’ve surrendered my need to make a name for myself. God is at work and His plan for me is more than enough.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 8-9, 1 Chronicles 18

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May 3, 2022

Soli Deo Gloria

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 8-9, 1 Chronicles 18

Soli Deo Gloria. A fancy (Latin) way of saying, “To the glory of God alone.” If I were to ever get a tattoo, this would be it. I’d have it written across my heart. It is the North Star of the Christian life. It is our highest priority. Our greatest passion. Our deepest love. It is the principle that guides every other principle by which we live and move and have our being. Everything we think. Everything we feel. Everything we say. Everything we do. All of it directed towards the glory of God. All of it designed to bring honor to God. All of it offered freely and humbly in praise to God.

Soli Deo Gloria. This is immediately what I thought when I read these words from 2 Samuel 8:11-12, “These (articles of silver, gold, and bronze) also King David dedicated to the Lord, together with the silver and gold he dedicated from all the nations he subdued, from Edom, Moab, the Ammonites, the Philistines, Amalie, and from the spoil of Hadadezer the son of Rehoboam, king of Zobah.” Think about how easy it would have been for David to believe his own hype. Think about how tempting it would have been for David to claim all the glory from all these victories for himself. I can imagine him in his tent looking over the map at the number of kings and tribes he had conquered and feeling pretty good about himself. How easy it would have been for him to simply reach out and claim it all. But David loved God. David knew he would still be keeping sheep if it weren’t for God. David knew he would have died long ago at the hands of Goliath if it hadn’t been for God. David knew his life up to this point was a testimony to the favor of God. So when the spoils of war start to flood into his camp, he dedicates the treasure to the Lord. This would have been a powerful sign to all who followed David - and probably to those who warred against David - as to who deserves the credit and the glory and the honor for all that has taken place. It’s not David. It’s God.

Soli Deo Gloria. It’s the phrase that comes to mind every time I reflect on all God has done for me in my life. The many different ministries I get to be involved in. As a pastor at PEPC, I’ve had a front row seat to hundreds of professions of faith over the last 12+ years. I’ve watched our church family make a huge impact in our community through our work with the DC Oakes and Legend High School or the launch of Douglas County Christian Counseling or our partnerships with the Parker Task Force or the Chamber of Commerce at Parker Days. As a professor at Denver Seminary, I get to impact the next generation of church leaders and it’s one of the great joys of my life to follow them in their careers as they go forth to share the gospel in all sorts of settings and contexts. As a leader in our denomination, I get to work with struggling churches and pastors and do all I can to encourage and help them along the way. As a board member of the Petros Network, I get train church planters and celebrate huge milestones like our 6,000th church plant and our 1,000,000th convert! It’s always tempting to claim some of the credit for myself. Always tempting to keep a bit of the glory for myself. But then I remember how far God has brought me. From the ash heap of my ministry career in Sun Prairie, WI with my marriage and family on the rocks to where I am today and all I can do is fall to my knees in gratitude. I don’t deserve any of this. I achieved none of this on my own. God gets all the glory for where I find myself in life.

Soli Deo Gloria. No matter where you find yourself in your spiritual journey, let me encourage you to make this your chief end. Your highest aim. Surrender all that you are and all that you have to Christ. Place all your resources of time and talent and treasure as His disposal. Give Him permission to use you as He sees fit. Then hold on for the ride! It will be the greatest, most exciting, most exhilarating adventure of your life! Trust me when I say God never disappoints!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 10, 1 Chronicles 19, Psalms 20, 53, 60, 75

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May 4, 2022

Soli Deo Gloria?

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 10, 1 Chronicles 19, Psalms 20, 53, 60, 75

I love these words of David from Psalms 20. “Now I know that the Lord saves his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with the saving might of his right hand. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.” (Psalms 20:6-7) David has just won significant victories over the Ammonites and Syrians. He has subdued their lands. Defeated their armies. Killed their generals. Historians of this particular time tell us David was a powerful warlord who took advantage of a power vacuum in the region to carve out his kingdom. Egypt, the dominant power for so long, was weak. Assyria and Babylon had yet to rise. As David wins victory after victory, he steps up to the postgame mic to give God all the glory.

It’s a good thing to ascribe to God all the glory for our successes in life. After all, He is the one who gave us our gifts and talents. He is the one who provides blessing and opportunity. We didn’t choose where we were born. We didn’t choose the family we were born into. So much of our success has nothing to do with us at all and so God rightly deserves all the praise. But what about when things go wrong? What about when tragedy strikes? What about the hard times that take us to the end of ourselves and beyond? David faced those times as well and still He praised God. Still he gave all the glory to God. Listen to what he writes in Psalm 60, “O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses; you have been angry; oh, restore us…you have made your people see hard things; given us wine to drink that made us stagger…Oh grant us help against the foe, for vain is the salvation of man! With God we shall do valiantly; it is He who will tread down our foes.”

Years ago, a favorite coach of mine was running off the field after a big victory. His team had struggled for years. The losses had piled up. Many were calling for his job. A reporter chased him down and asked him what the key was to the victory. I still remember the coach’s reply, “God was with us in the victory today but He was also with us through every single defeat leading up to this point.” Wow! That’s a man who understands God! He gave God the glory for both his victories and defeats. His successes and failures. His high times and low times. He knew God was with him no matter what. What about you? Do you feel the same way? You may be experiencing a season of great blessing in your life right now. A season of success. A season where everything you touch seems to turn to gold. Or you may be experiencing loss. Tragedy. Struggle. Heartbreak. No matter what season you find yourself in, give God the glory. Trust Him for the journey. Believe He is with you and for you and will deliver those He loves!

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 65-67, 69-70

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May 5, 2022

His Story

Readings for today: Psalms 65-67, 69-70

I still remember one of my professors in college walking to the board on the first day of class and writing in big block letters the word, “HISTORY.” “History”, she said, “is all about ‘his’ story and the first thing we need to do is reclaim this word for the rest of us.” She then took out an eraser and re-wrote “HISTORY” as “HERSTORY” or “HYSTORY.” Now, admittedly, this was a Women’s Studies course at the University of Colorado at Boulder. So perhaps I should have expected something like this. And my initial reaction was pretty sarcastic and dismissive. However, over the years, I have come to believe the professor was more right than she knew at the time. History truly is “HIS STORY.” Not a “male” story of course but the story of God’s engagement with His world and His people.

The Psalms express these deep theological truths so well. David writes about creation. “O God of our salvation, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas; the one who by his strength established the mountains, being girded with might; who stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples, so that those who dwell at the ends of the earth are in awe at your signs. You make the going out of the morning and the evening to shout for joy.” (Psalms 65:5-8) He writes about redemption. “Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds toward the children of man. He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There did we rejoice in him, who rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations— let not the rebellious exalt themselves.” (Psalms 66:5-7) He speaks to God’s sovereignty. “Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth.” (Psalms 67:3-4) He speaks to God’s tenderness and comfort. “But as for me, my prayer is to you, O Lord. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love answer me in your saving faithfulness.” (Psalms 69:13) The beauty of the Psalms is how they express the full range of human emotion and experience. They validate so much of what we feel and experience on a daily basis.

When you reflect on your own life, do you see God’s hand at work? Do you sense God’s abiding presence in times of crisis? Are you able to see God’s sovereign hand guiding and directing your steps? Where have you experienced God’s love? When did you encounter God’s grace? God is just as active in our personal histories as He is in human history. David was able to see God’s handiwork all around him from creation to salvation to the rise and fall of nations to the personal attention God pays to those he loves in times of struggle and heartbreak. David has been my teacher over the years. Helping me see the events of my life through God’s eternal lens. The more I spend time in the Psalms, the more I realize the closeness of God in every season of my life. Take some time today to reflect on the many, many ways God has been faithful to you.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 11-12, 1 Chronicles 20, Psalms 51

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May 6, 2022

Abuse

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 11-12, 1 Chronicles 20, Psalms 51

The story of David and Bathsheba is perhaps the most well-know stories of abuse in Scripture. David, flush with his success on the battlefield and drunk on his own power, decides to stay home rather than head off to war. As he stands on the roof, proudly overlooking all he has accomplished, he catches a glimpse of the beautiful Bathsheba bathing beneath him. He heart fills with lust. He covets this beautiful woman and who's around to stop him? The army is off at war. Her husband is one of David's mighty men which means he's probably on the front lines. There's no one around to protect her. No one to plead her cause. Her husband's close relationship with the king suggests Bathsheba and David probably knew each other. Who knows how long David's been waiting for this chance? Perhaps this was a secret desire he'd been entertaining for years. So he calls for her. Commands her to come. With her life on the line, she obeys and conceives a child from the one night stand. Now comes the coverup. David sends for Uriah. He's hoping Uriah will use his furlough to sleep with his wife. But Uriah holds fast to his integrity. He refuses to take the bait. So David orchestrates his murder.

It's a horrible story. One we cannot and should not try to explain away or gloss over or reduce to a morality tale. Bathsheba is raped. Uriah murdered. A child dies. All because of David's insatiable lust and appetite for power. Left to his own devices, David might have gotten away with it. But God was watching. God is always watching. "For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun." (2 Samuel 12:12) God sends Nathan the prophet, David's own brother you'll remember, to confront him. Nathan risks his life to stand up to David. Expose his sin. Call him out. And though David repents, the ripple effect of his sin will impact his family and his people for years to come.

Sadly, this story is all too familiar. I cannot tell you the number of pastors and ministry leaders (all men by the way) I've watched fall from grace. Drunk with their own success and power, they believe themselves to be untouchable. Beyond accountability. In their arrogance and pride, they take advantage of the weak and vulnerable. I've personally had to lead efforts to remove six such pastors over the years. When confronted, they use all kinds of justifications to defend their sexual and spiritual abuse. I've sat with their victims and listened to heart-rending stories of grooming, gaslighting, emotional manipulation, and blame-shifting. These local stories mirror the celebrity cases that have hit the news in recent years. And the ripple effect impacts families, churches, and organizations. In fact, it often destroys them.

God will not be mocked. What we try to do in secret, He will expose. He will not let sin go unpunished. He hates abuse of every kind. He stands with the victims against those who would use their power to wound, exploit, and oppress. He holds leaders especially accountable for the way they treat those under their care. Those Christians called to leadership inside the church or outside the church must hold themselves to a higher standard. We must constantly ask God to search our hearts and root out any sin that may have taken root lest it blossom into something destructive.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 32, 86, 102-103, 122

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May 7, 2022

Confession

Readings for today: Psalms 32, 86, 102-103, 122

The more I spend time with people, the more I am convinced that so much of our pain and heartache and struggle is because we do not truly understand who we are. We have a distorted self-image. We look in the mirror and we are blind to the true nature of the person looking back at us. This is why reading and re-reading and re-reading Scripture is so important. Within the pages of this precious book, God teaches us the deepest truths about ourselves. The narrative runs something like this...

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27) You and I were designed to live in a world of perfection. A paradise called Eden. We were made in the image of God so that we might show forth the glory of God. We were given dominion and authority and power to rule over all God has made as a kind of vice-regent or undershepherd.

“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” (Psalms 51:5) We abandoned our vocation. We rebelled against God. We aspired to be gods ourselves. In so doing, the image of God was marred. Corrupted. Poisoned. Every single human being since Adam and Eve’s fall has been born in brokenness. Born in sin. Conceived in iniquity. From the moment the sperm fertilizes the egg, we are lost.

“Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3) We are lost but we are not hopeless! Out of love, the Father sent His only Son into the world that whosoever would believe in Him would not perish in their sin. All who believe in Christ are born again. Born a second time. This time of the Spirit.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” (2 Corinthians 5:17) Being born of the Spirit literally changes our DNA. Changes the fundamental reality of our existence. Gives us a new nature. A new heart. A heart of flesh sensitive to the leading of God to replace the heart of stone that was so rebellious and resistant. The image of God is now restored. Our vocation renewed. The commission re-issued. Go. Make disciples of all nations. Baptize. Teach. Fill the earth. Subdue. Have dominion. Share my glory with all of creation.

“In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.” (1 Corinthians 15:52) The final promise. Jesus will come again. On the last day, a trumpet shall sound. The heavens will open. The dead will rise. And we shall be changed from one degree of glory to another. The imperfect shall be made perfect. The perishable shall be made imperishable. Sin and death will be destroyed. Eternity sets in. We are home.

This is the fundamental worldview of the Psalmist. It’s the fundamental narrative they are singing about though the revelation of Jesus as Messiah still lies far off in the future. They trust in the steadfast love and faithfulness of the Father to bring about His will on the earth. They also understand this side of heaven that we are broken, sinful, corrupt creatures in desperate need of God’s grace. And grace only comes as we confess. As we repent. It’s more than feeling bad. More than feeling guilty. More than feeling ashamed. It’s about turning from our sin. Turning towards God. Making the necessary changes in our lives in response to all God has done for us. “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,

whose sin is covered...I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.” (Psalms 32:1, 5)

What do you need to confess today? Where have you fallen short? Where do you feel enslaved? Afflicted? Ashamed? Guilty? In what areas of your life has the Spirit brought conviction? Is it your thoughts? Attitudes? Actions? Feelings? The life of a believer in Jesus is one of constant confession as we come before the Lord acknowledging our sin, receiving His grace, and learn to follow in His ways. Does this mean we should live our lives in constant guilt? Live our lives in constant shame? Absolutely not! God’s love is everlasting! And His promise is sure! “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.” (Psalms 103:11-12) Cling to the love of God, sinner! Let His love be the cornerstone of your life! Let His grace set you free! Trust in His faithfulness to save you from depths of your sin!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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May 9, 2022

Dysfunction

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 13-15

All families live with some level of dysfunction. Dysfunction occurs where unhealthy behavior (rage, addiction, abuse, neglect, etc.) is normalized, leading members of a family to make unhealthy accommodations rather than pursue repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Left unchecked, dysfunction leads destructive patterns of behavior that often impact generations as unhealthy coping skills are passed down from parent to child. Breaking generational cycles of sin is extremely difficult and requires incredible courage as well as sacrifice as dysfunctional family systems often violently resist change. The same is true in human societies as well. They are simply "family systems" at a macro level.

The family of King David is perhaps the pre-eminent Biblical example of the dysfunctional family system. Of course, his situation is made much more complex by the cultural practice of polygamy which led to many children by many different wives and concubines, all seeking to ascend the line of succession. Dynastic considerations complicate what we read today but many lessons can be drawn that are helpful in our own lives. Amnon is the oldest son of David and heir apparent to the throne. As such, he has grown accustomed to power and privilege and simply taking what he wants when he wants it. His treatment of Tamar, his half-sister, is horrific in its own right but probably emblematic of how Amnon lives his life. Absalom is not much better. What begins as a noble desire to protect his sister from public shame ends in murder and a coup attempt against his own father. Who knows what prompted Absalom's move against David but it clearly was pre-meditated and even assisted by some of David's closest confidants. David doesn't help matters much. As king, he should have punished Amnon for his crime but instead appears to give him a pass. Once Absalom takes matters into his own hands, David appears both relieved and appalled. He refuses to forgive and reconcile with Absalom which only isolates him further and divides the royal household. David chooses to ignore the growing conspiracy until its almost too late and thus has to flee into exile. His family is shattered. His kingdom is divided. His country stands on the brink of civil war.

I think of my own family system. Several years ago, we went to counseling together to try and break dysfunctional patterns in our own lives. I had to learn to deal more effectively with my anger issues. I had to wrestle with my fears and failures and disappointments. I had to face the fact that I caused my children pain through the choices I made in how I responded to the difference circumstances we faced as a family. I had to take a long hard look at myself through Christ's eyes and repent. Ask for forgiveness. Pursue reconciliation. It wasn't easy. It's still not easy! It requires humility and sacrifice. I have to relinquish my need for control. My need to protect my kids from the consequences of the choices they make in life. My need to project "success" to the world around me. I've had to come to grips with the fact that my family is as broken as any and I am a major contributor to that brokenness because of my own sin issues. Honestly, it's a painful journey. Then again, dying to self is always painful.

What about your family system? If your family's story was included in the Scriptures, what would others see? What failures? What successes? Would they see patterns of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation? Or would they see pride, neglect, abuse, addiction, and rampant conflict? Or perhaps a mixture of both? Where is Christ at work in your family right now? What areas do you need Christ to pay particular attention to in order to bring healing, wholeness, grace and peace? Are there particular family members you need to be praying specifically for? Who are they? What are the issues? How are you contributing to the pain? Ask Christ to help you chart a different path. One that leads to true transformation.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 3-4, 13, 28, 55

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May 10, 2022

The Lord is our Shield

Readings for today: Psalms 3-4, 13, 28, 55

”But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head.” (Ps. 3:3)

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

“But I have trusted in Your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because He has dealt bountifully with me.” (Ps. 13:5-6)

“The Lord is my strength and my shield; in Him my heart trusts, and I am helped; my heart exults, and with song I give thanks to him. The Lord is the strength of His people; He is the saving refuge of His anointed.” (Ps. 28:7-8)

“Cast your burden on the Lord, and He will sustain you; He will never permit the righteous to be moved.” (Ps. 55:22)

These are some of my favorite verses in the Psalms. In the midst of civil war and exile and hardship, David sings of the goodness of God. He sings of the faithfulness of God. He sings of provision and protection of God. A careful reader will naturally ask “why?” Why would David rest on such promises when his entire kingdom has been upended? How can David be so confident when his own flesh and blood has betrayed him? Is David naive? Is David’s faith blind? Is he just putting spiritual platitudes and cliches to music? Not at all.

David is a man well acquainted with grief and sorrow. David is a man who’s seen violence and evil and suffering up close and personal. David is a man who’s grappled with his own demons. He is no innocent. He is no snowflake. He is no dilettante. He’s come by his faith honestly. He’s taken great risks over the course of his life and found God faithful. He’s met God on the mountaintops in his great victories. He’s met God at the bottom of the pit in his sin and despair. Through it all David has learned some things. He’s learned he’s a broken man. A man capable of great evil. A man who is as susceptible to pride and corruption as anyone. Perhaps more so because of the position he holds. He’s also learned God is steadfast and faithful. He will literally never let David go. This gives David comfort when times get hard which is why he’s able to pen the words above.

The great John Newton - author of Amazing Grace - once remarked towards the end of his life that had had learned two things. First, he was a great sinner. Second, Christ was an even greater Savior. Newton had been a slave ship captain for many years before becoming active in the abolitionist movement. I imagine he lived with much regret for the things he had done and the way he had helped perpetuate one of the great evils in human history. And yet, Newton also knew God’s love was greater and more faithful still! It’s why he could write, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

What about you? How did it feel to read the Psalms today? We’re several months into our Bible reading plan and it’s easy to forget or just go through the motions. Let me encourage you to really take some time today and pray over the verses listed above. Let God’s Spirit impress them deep on your heart. Maybe even memorize them so you have them to hold onto when times get difficult as they invariably will. Life is this world is hard. Live for any length of time and you will become well

acquainted with grief and sorrow. You will probably witness violence and evil and suffering. You may even experience it firsthand yourself. You will have to grapple with your own demons just like David and John Newton did. But as you bring yourself before the Lord each day authentically and honestly and transparently, you will find in Him a refuge. A shield. A comfort. A peace. This is His promise to all who would follow Him.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 16-18

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May 11, 2022

Failing to Forgive

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 16-18

There are consequences when we fail to forgive from the heart. Consequences when we fail to reconcile. Consequences when we fail to follow God's will and seek to restore broken relationships. The impact of those consequences tend to be commensurate with the authority and power and influence we wield. So a parent who refuses to take this step with their child can impact future generations. An employer who refuses to take this step with employees can cost a company. A pastor who refuses to take this step with her/his congregation can split a church.

David was a king. A man who held the power of life and death in his hands. A man whose authority was supreme and final. The impact of his decisions impacted not just him and his household but a nation. This is true not only in the Absalom narrative but also at other times in David's life. There is a ripple effect to the decisions he makes. When he makes good and godly decisions, the nation is blessed. When he makes poor and ungodly decisions, the nation is cursed. As we read the other day, David's refusal to execute justice when his daughter Tamar was raped creates a crisis in his family that eventually spreads to the nation. Absalom takes matters into his own hands leading to his exile. David brings him back but refuses to forgive him from the heart and restore him to his place. In his isolation, Absalom begins to conspire to steal the kingdom. David seems blissfully unaware as the Absalom's influence grows. He's almost caught completely by surprise when the news finally comes and he has to flee for his life. The ripples grow as allegiances shift and new alliances are formed. Ahithophel sides with Absalom. Hushai with David. Joab goes with David so Absalom makes Amasa his new general. Abiathar and Zadok stay in Jerusalem as priests but remain loyal to David. Shimei curses David. Ziba makes his move to take over what's left of the household of Saul. Everyone, it seems, is looking out for themselves. Such is the chaos that happens when forgiveness and reconciliation are ignored. It leads to all kinds of brokenness, suffering, and pain.

We've all probably had this experience. A friend says something or does something that hurts. We refuse to forgive. Now the rest of our friends feel forced to choose sides. A marriage breaks up. Divorce papers are signed. Once again, friends and family feel forced to take sides. A business deal goes south. Partners split up. Lawyers are called to divide up the assets. Clients and customers are pressured to declare their loyalties. Seasons of ministry come to an end. Pastors are let go. Forced out in some cases. Congregations split. Such experiences are painful and never easy. Too many of us take the path of least resistance which is avoidance. Abandoning the relationships we once enjoyed because forgiveness is too hard. Reconciliation too much. The way of Jesus too difficult.

And yet, Jesus' words continue to haunt us. Continue to push us. Continue to convict us. Forgiveness and reconciliation are essential to the Christian life. Coming to terms with our brothers and sisters is required by Jesus if we are to call ourselves His disciples. We are not given any other options. Jesus doesn't leave us any other choices. Jesus wants His family to be unified not just in name but from the heart.

"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us...For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matthew 6:12, 14-15)

“Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.” (Matthew 18:21-22)

“And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." (Mark 11:25)

Think of the pain that could have been avoided had David listened to God. Think of the pain in our own lives that could be avoided if only we would listen to God. Who is Jesus calling you to forgive today?

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 26, 40-41, 58, 61-62, 64

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May 12, 2022

“40”

Readings for today: Psalms 26, 40-41, 58, 61-62, 64

It’s easy to forget that the Psalms were actually songs. They were set to music. They were meant to be sung not just read or spoken aloud. The people of Israel sang them when they gathered for worship. They sang them in their homes and villages. They sang them whenever they got together to give God praise.

One of my favorite rock groups of all time is U2. Many years ago, they put Psalm 40 to music. Gathered a crowd of thousands of people in 1983 at Red Rocks to sing it. Though I wasn’t present at that particular concert, the video of it is powerful and brings back memories of other concerts I attended where Bono belted out these biblical lyrics to a largely secular audience and they joined him in singing with all their hearts.

https://youtu.be/CMVghDg-ePc

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 19-21, Psalms 5, 8, 42

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May 13, 2022

Division

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 19-21, Psalms 5, 38, 42

We are a fickle people by nature. Driven by our emotions, we struggle to forgive. Struggle to reconcile. Struggle to work past our pain. Our differences. Our jealousies. Our frustrations. Our failures. These struggles lead us to division as we each go our own way.

David grieves for his son Absalom and almost loses his kingdom a second time.

The ten tribes of Israel grow jealous of the tribe of Judah and rebel a second time under the leadership of Sheba.

Shimei comes before the king seeking forgiveness for his rash words when David was fleeing for his life. Abishai wants to execute him on the spot.

Mephibosheth and Ziba both lay claim to the king's favor.

Joab kills Amasa in cold blood out of anger at being relieved of command.

Israel suffers because of an ungodly act committed by King Saul against the Gibeonites and makes atonement through human sacrifice.

We humans have a tendency to make a mess of things. It is just so hard for us to take a step back and see the bigger picture. We are highly reactive creatures. Refusing to give others the benefit of the doubt. Refusing to extend grace to those who have hurt us or disappointed us or let us down. We would much rather hold onto our anger. Hold onto our pain. Keep a detailed record of wrongs that we can trot out anytime we feel threatened or afraid. We justify our actions or inactions and the cycle of division continues.

Think about how we do life these days. Many jump from church to church to church, never really putting down roots. Just as soon as we are let down or disappointed, we move on. Always with a "godly" justification, of course. "I'm not being fed." "I don't feel connected." "I don't like this pastor or that leader or they didn't meet my needs." It's just easier to move down the street to the next church rather than work through our issues. Think about the number of different denominations that exist today. While some diversity may be legitimate, the fact that we divide over such petty, non-essential issues is a stain on the Body of Christ. It is direct rebellion against the command of our Lord to be one, even as He and the Father are one.

But it's not just churches who have this issue. It is society as a whole. Republicans and Democrats can't even exist in the same room anymore. Conservatives and liberals see themselves as mortal enemies. How many parents have I watched switch their kid to a different sports team rather than work through disappointment and conflict? How many schools and teachers have watched families walk out their door because of a bad experience rather than sit down and work through the issues? How many businesses lose long-time customers over the smallest of disappointments? The examples are legion in our culture today.

Division leads to weakness. The inability to face our fears, admit our failures, and work through problems creates a lack of resiliency emotionally, physically, and spiritually in both the individual and society as a whole. We simply lack the capacity to process our pain and disappointment in a healthy way. We look for someone to blame. We attack. We accuse. We react. We rush in. And the results are often tragic.

So what's the answer? Confession. "For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me...I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning...I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart. O Lord, all my longing is before you; my sighing is not hidden from you." (Psalms 38:4, 6, 8-9) Humility. "But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you. Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me." (Psalms 5:7-8) Seeking God. "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?" (Psalms 42:1-2)

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 22-23, Psalms 57

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May 14, 2022

Thy will or thy will?

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 22-23, Psalms 57

“There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done. ' All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it.” - C.S. Lewis, The Great Divorce

I thought about these words from Lewis when I read 2 Samuel 22:26-28 today. “With the merciful you show yourself merciful; with the blameless person you show yourself blameless; with the purified you deal purely, and with the crooked you make yourself seem tortuous. You save a humble people, but your eyes are on the proud to bring them down.” There is a reciprocity to our relationship with God. He promises to draw near those who draw near to Him. (James 4:8) This is not a “works-righteousness” philosophy. This isn’t about earning God’s favor or trying to win your way into heaven. It’s simply a recognition of the reality that those who truly seek God with all their heart will quite naturally find themselves longing to draw near to Him. Longing to be more like Him. Longing to take on the characteristics and qualities God has revealed about Himself. God is merciful and gracious so the “God-seeker” will naturally want to become merciful and gracious themselves. God is blameless and righteous so the God-seeker will naturally want to follow God’s law and obey His commands. God is pure and holy so the God-seeker will naturally separate themselves from anything resembling sin. And the key to becoming this kind of person is humility. Dying to self so that we might live for the glory of God alone.

Now here’s the really crazy thing. Through the wonders of neuroscience, we now know that the thoughts, attitudes, and actions we engage in literally shape and re-shape our brains. Myelin sheaths form along our neural pathways which, in turn, become self-reinforcing. It’s why it’s so hard the older we get, the harder it is for us to change. Some patterns have just become too ingrained. Hopefully, our parents helped us set godly patterns when we were young. Setting our feet on the path towards righteousness so that when we got older we didn’t depart from it. Sadly, far too many of us had sinful patterns of selfishness, greed, addiction, indulgence, etc. as our parents mowed down every potential obstacle, insulated us from every disappointment, and protected us against all hardship and pain. The result is not only a lack of resiliency and an unwillingness to grow up and take on responsibility but even more tragically, we have become proud and self-centered. We demand our own way and we refuse to submit even to God.

What do we expect will happen when we come before the judgment throne of God at the end of our lives? Do we really expect a person who has spent a lifetime pursuing their own ends and chasing their own dreams to suddenly do an about face? Do we really expect a person who has spent a lifetime accumulating great wealth and indulging every desire and pursuing every pleasure to suddenly surrender these things to God? Here’s the hard but honest truth. God will not force anyone to spend eternity with Him. No one ends up in a place they did not choose. Even now, we are charting a course towards heaven or hell. The thoughts, attitudes, and actions we engage in are shaping us and preparing us for where we will spend eternity. What kind of person are you? What kind of person are you in the process of becoming? Are you intentionally cultivating a way of life that says to God, “Thy will be done” or are you intentionally cultivating a way of life that says to God, “My will be done?” There is no middle ground. There is no neutral territory. You are either on the path towards heaven or the path towards hell. Let the Spirit set your feet on the narrow path that leads to salvation!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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May 16, 2022

God Reigns!

Readings for today: Psalms 97-99

When I look at the world around me, I find it easy to get discouraged. My wife tells me it's because I pay far too much attention to the news on and I will readily admit I have a difficult time turning it off. The brutal invasion of Russia into Ukraine. Severe drought and famine in eastern Africa. Food insecurity and starvation in so many parts of the world. The impact of climate change on developing nations. Persecution of fellow Christians in countries where it is illegal to worship much less share the good news of the gospel. The deeper the Spirit takes me into Christ, the more these things effect me. I am often troubled when I pray. I often find myself brooding over the chaos of the world. Wondering when God will finally put an end to it all.

I am just as troubled for events here at home. The mass shootings at local grocery stores and churches. The rise in white supremacy and other hate groups. The desperate plight of the poor as inflation continues to rise. The rage that seems to simmer under the surface of our society. The impotence of our political leadership who are more beholden to hyper-partisanship than they are the welfare of our nation. Even more locally, I am baffled by the ability of people to walk away from relationships they've cultivated for years. Troubled by our wide-spread lack of resiliency. Our inability to process disappointment and pain in healthy ways. The deeper the Spirit takes me into Christ, the more I realize how essential forgiveness and reconciliation are to the life of any community. Be it a family, church, school, business, town, etc. We simply cannot survive without it and yet fewer and fewer people seem capable of grace.

I am broken by the personal and pastoral experiences I've had recently. I recently officiated a memorial service for a 32 year old young man. Sitting with the family in their grief broke my heart. I have another dear friend who is a young dad potentially facing an uncertain future due to an unexpected diagnosis. I know several couples who are struggling to hold their marriages and families together. I know too many teenagers who are fighting depression and anxiety. Yes, I know this is part of what I signed up for but it doesn't make it any easier. I certainly am no superman. My heart breaks on almost continual basis for those I love and have the privilege to serve.

So where do I go to find hope? I turn to the Psalms. Listen again to these glorious, encouraging words. "The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice. Clouds and thick darkness surround him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side. His lightning lights up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth. The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all peoples see his glory." (Psalm 97:1-6) What a declaration of hope! God reigns! Not God will reign or God has reigned. No! God reigns in the present tense! He reigns in the here and now. He reigns over the chaos. He reigns over the pain. He reigns over disease and death. He reigns over it all. Globally. Domestically. Locally. Personally. God reigns! And because God reigns, I can be glad. Even in the midst of all my fears. Even as I stumble under the weight of all my burdens. Even when I am discouraged or troubled or broken. God reigns. I can rejoice. "Light shines on the righteous and joy on the upright in heart. Rejoice in the Lord, you who are righteous, and praise his holy name." (Psalm 97:11-12)

Now I know many will argue this doesn't change a thing. It's not like war and violence and sickness and suffering are going away anytime soon. They will use world events as evidence to push back

against the idea of a good and holy and righteous and sovereign God. They will argue it's impossible for God to be all these things when there is so much wrong in the world. This leaves us with one of only two conclusions…so they say. Either God isn't good. Isn't holy. Isn't righteous. And perhaps doesn't care. Or God is not sovereign. He is not all-powerful. He doesn't reign and is at the mercy of the same forces we are that operate with impunity in our world. To be honest, if I didn't have faith. If I hadn't encountered God personally. If I didn't know God on an intimate level, I might be tempted to agree.

But I do believe. I do have faith. Even in the darkness, I trust the light will one day dawn. Even when the world is crashing down around me, I trust the One who holds all things in His hands. Even when the lives of those I love seem to be falling apart, I trust the One who holds all things together. God reigns! God is on His throne! God is sovereignly directing all things for His glorious purposes! So I will sing! I will "sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations. He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God." (Psalm 98:1-3)

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 24, 1 Chronicles 21-22, Psalms 30

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May 17, 2022

Addiction

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 24, 1 Chronicles 21-22, Psalms 30

The more experts study the impact of social media on our mental health, the more scary the results become. The data is clear and unequivocal. Prolonged social media use presents like addiction with similar accompanying symptoms. The more we use social media, the less happy we seem to be and the more socially isolated we become. The comparisons social media invites between our mundane, everyday lives and someone else's highlight reel doesn't feel good and yet we cannot bring ourselves to quit. Why is it so hard? It is because social media is specifically designed to trigger dopamine "highs" in the brain. Dopamine release is triggered by unpredictability, small bits of information that can be digested quickly, and most importantly, reward cues. (i.e. number of "likes" on FB, number of "followers" on Instagram, number of "retweets" on Twitter, etc.)

I think about the number of people I know who draw at least a part of their self-worth off the number of friends they have on Facebook. The number of times people hit the "heart" button on an Instagram pic. The number of retweets and "likes" a pithy phrase gets on Twitter or the amount of views on a YouTube video. Especially young people. But it's not just social media. I think of the number of pastors I know who draw their self-worth off the number of people who show up on a weekend for worship. I think of the drive there is in most churches to grow their online audience. I know some pastors who seem to live or die based on whether they make OutReach Magazine's Top 100 list. I think of the uncritical assumptions too many Christians make that larger churches must be doing something "right" and smaller churches must be doing something "wrong." Or the reverse. I think of the number of folks I know who criticize large churches simply because they're large. I once belonged to a denomination where the salaries of all of the pastors in each region were published and voted on each year. I remember one older man who came from a very small church standing up to rail against large church pastors whose salaries were more than his entire church's budget. Never mind the differences in scale or complexities of the job. He just didn't like big churches and made his opinions known.

Why are we so obsessed with numbers? It does seem to be an American phenomenon. I travel the world fairly regularly. I've been to China, Mexico, South Korea, Ethiopia, Uganda, etc. I've interacted with pastors from all around the world in lots of different settings. In my experience, they just don't seem as hung up as we are on numbers. That isn't to say they ignore them. They pay attention. They evaluate. They are wise and discerning. But there doesn't seem to be the emotional attachment American Christians, and especially American pastors, seem to have with attendance, buildings, and budgets. It's like we get a dopamine "high" every time the sanctuary's full.

It's why I find this story about David in our reading today so convicting. David wants to number his people. He wants to know the size of his army. He wants to measure his power. His influence. His accomplishments. He wants to feel secure. Safe. In control. The images I have in my head are of third-world despots throwing military parades to show off their strength. David is clearly feeling insecure and in that moment, Satan strikes. He comes along and tempts David according to 1 Chronicles 21 and God allows it to happen according to 2 Samuel 24. The results are tragic. "Thus says the Lord, 'Choose what you will: either three years of famine, or three months of devastation by your foes while the sword of your enemies overtakes you, or else three days of the sword of the Lord, pestilence on the land, with the angel of the Lord destroying throughout all the territory of Israel.' Now decide what answer I shall return to him who sent me." (1 Chronicles 21:11-12) God is going to teach David a lesson in humility. And the lesson is harsh and brutal.

70,000 die from the plague. This is horrific and we cannot understand why God would do such a thing. At the same time, we have to remember that such events take place at the mysterious intersection of God's will and human freedom. David's decision has consequences and because David is king, the consequences impact his people. The same is true even for us today. The decisions our politicians make impact real people in real life and can cause real pain and suffering. David decides to number his fighting men and around the same time, a plague begins. It is brutal. Virulent. And it kills. Somewhere in David's mind. In the prophet Gad's mind. Probably in Joab's mind and the minds of so many others, these events are related. The plague is perceived as God's punishment on Israel for David's sinful choices. And perhaps it is. We cannot dismiss the possibility out of hand for God's ways are not our ways and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. He has clearly told His people over and over again that there are consequences...real, life-threatening consequences...for sin. God's justice and righteousness will not be mocked.

So how do we respond? What does this mean for our lives? First and foremost, it should lead us to confession. Repentance. It should call to mind all the times we too have placed our faith in numbers. Our mental health and well-being in the number of likes we get from social media. None of us are immune. Second, it should lead us to the cross. To the place where the penalty for our sin was paid. To the place where God's judgment was fully and completely and utterly satisfied by the death of our Lord. We are not condemned. We need not feel any shame. God has done for us what we could not. Third, it should inspire us to live for Him. To live from that place of grace knowing God has torn down the dividing wall of hostility that exists between us and made peace with us by the blood of His cross. We are forgiven so we can forgive others. Grace was extended to us so we can extend it to others. Love was shown to us so we can show love to others. We can rest secure in God's hands.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 108-109

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May 18, 2022

Suffering

Readings for today: Psalms 108-109

I have walked into great suffering. The people of the land into which I have come are suffering under a brutal drought. Famine has robbed them of their food supply. Plagues of locusts have stolen what little was left over the years. They are in danger of mass starvation. Compounding this terrible and tragic condition is prevalence of khat. A powerful drug that is a major cash crop in eastern Ethiopia. Plane loads of the stuff are shipped all over the Horn of Africa. But much of it stays right here. So many of the locals suffer from addiction to this drug. They chew the leaves and then lay blasted out of their minds on the sidewalks and streets of the city. It's heartbreaking. Layer in the widespread poverty. The ongoing and historic tensions between tribes. And the violence that breaks out occasionally and it makes for an utterly hopeless condition.

I imagine David was familiar with such suffering. Anyone who can write these words knows suffering intimately. "For I am poor and needy, and my heart is stricken within me. I am gone like a shadow at evening; I am shaken off like a locust. My knees are weak through fasting; my body has become gaunt, with no fat. I am an object of scorn to my accusers; when they see me, they wag their heads." David has experienced much suffering over the course of his life. Despite being called a "man after God's own heart", his life was not always up and to the right. He didn't jump from spiritual mountaintop to spiritual mountaintop. Quite the opposite. He suffered early in his reign. He suffered in the middle of his reign. And here he is at the end of his reign…suffering. He lived on the run when he first was anointed. Fleeing the wrath of Saul. He was betrayed by one of his own sons who launched a rebellion to try to take the kingdom from him. His own sinful pride and lust for power cost him dearly on more than one occasion. David suffers from external forces outside his control and he suffers from internal forces - also outside his control - that exist inside his own heart.

Does any of this sound or feel familiar? It should. This is the story of our lives as well. We are all subject to the principalities and powers of this world. Political forces that pass laws and public policy that impact us on a daily basis. Cultural and social forces that push against all forms of godliness. Economic forces that rise and fall according to the whims of the free market. Global forces that affect supply chains and deny us access to some of the basic staples of life. Not only that, we all suffer from a sinful human nature. The passions and desires that fill our hearts are naturally oriented away from God. It's why we seem so susceptible to violence, deceit, greed, and selfishness. We are a broken people in desperate need of grace.

David agrees. "Help me, O Lord my God! Save me according to your steadfast love! Let them know that deliverance comes from your hand; you, O Lord, have done it!…With my mouth I will give great thanks to the Lord; I will praise Him in the midst of the throng. For He stands at the right hand of the needy one, to save him from those who condemn his soul to death." This is my prayer this week for my brothers and sisters over here in eastern Ethiopia. May it be our prayer as well! May we look to God in the midst of our suffering and trust Him to stand at our right hand in our hour of need.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 23-26

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May 19, 2022

Putting your House in Order

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 23-26

One of the great privileges of my job is to walk with families as their loved ones experience their final days. It's usually a tender time as everyone gathers to say goodbye. It can be a complicated time as well especially if the person has not taken the time to get their affairs in order. Perhaps they never signed a DNR or prepared an advance directive. The result is the family remains in the dark as to their end of life wishes and it causes unnecessary suffering. Perhaps they never prepared a will or talked to their family about how to settle the estate after they die. The result is conflict as surviving family members fight one another for their share. I remember one man who put all the property in his name alone which caused his widow to fight through probate. I remember another man who took care of everything for his wife – including driving – leaving her completely at a loss when he passed. At the same time, I've seen what happens when someone does it well. They've prepared all the necessary documents. They've clearly communicated their wishes. They've held a series of family meetings to make sure there is no confusion. This turns out to be one of the greatest blessings someone can give as they take those final steps from this life into the next.

David understood how important it was to set his house in order. He is old. He is dying. His reign is coming to an end. He wants to do all he can to set his son up for success. So he gathers all the leaders of Israel. He organizes them according to their call. He clarifies their roles and responsibilities. The Levites are numbered and charged to work in the house of the Lord. The divisions of the priests are established according to their lineage, divided by lot, and established in their rotations. He then organizes the musicians and sets them apart for their service in worship. Finally, he identifies the gatekeepers, treasurers, and other officials. All in an effort to secure his succession and ensure a smooth transition.

What about you? Is your house in order? Are you prepared to pass on what the Lord has entrusted to you? Do you think about future generations of your family? Future generations of your church family? What kind of legacy are you leaving those who will come after you? Have you communicated your wishes? Signed the necessary paperwork? Done all you can to smooth the way for those who will come after you? These are critical conversations to have with those you love. They represent the essence of godly stewardship.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 131, 138-139, 143-145

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May 20, 2022

The Wondrous Works of God

Readings for today: Psalms 131, 138-139, 143-145

“Why do you go to Africa?” It’s a question I am frequently asked. Especially in light of the fact that this is my fifteenth or sixteenth time over here. Most people could understand coming over here once or twice on a mission trip. But the commitment I’ve made to give my life to this particular Kingdom cause intrigues them. They want to know more. They want to know what motivates me to sacrifice the time and the money to make these trips happen. They want to know what it is about this particular mission that keeps me coming back for more.

In Psalm 145:4, David writes, “One generation shall commend your works to another and shall declare your mighty acts.” Every time I come over here, I get to hear of the mighty works of God. Every time I sit down to interview a church planter, I hear them speak of “the might of God’s awesome deeds.” Over and over again, they declare His greatness and goodness. Many of them put their lives on the line to make His name famous in regions of the world where the name of Jesus Christ has never been spoken. They sing of His glorious splendor. They sing of His righteousness and holiness. They sing of His wondrous works. They tell tales of miraculous healings from disease. Deliverance from addiction. Raising the dead. These signs and wonders draw people to Christ like a moth to flame. Hundreds of new churches are being planted. Tens of thousands are coming to know Christ. It’s simply incredible.

These stories never get old. Not for me. I live for them. I need them like I need the air I breathe. They inspire me. They encourage me. They strengthen me. They lift me up. They fill my heart and soul to overflowing. They remind me God is still very much on His throne. He still very much is on the move in our world. He is still very much building His church and the gates of hell shall not stand against it.

Another thing these stories do is humble me. The men and women I meet have nothing. They come from the deepest poverty. They often lack a good education. They are the poor in spirit and yet to them belongs the kingdom of heaven. They are the meek who shall inherit the earth. Their devotion is pure which is why they see God. It is clear to me as I listen to them share that “the Lord upholds those who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down.” They look to the Lord and He “gives them their food in due season.” They look to the Lord and He “opens His hand to satisfy the desire of every living thing.” They look to the Lord and He “draws near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth. He fulfills the desire of those who fear Him; He hears their cry and saves them.” This is why I come. I need to see the works of the Lord firsthand. I need to bear witness to His goodness in the land of the living. I need to see the wondrous works of God for myself so that “my mouth will speak of the praise of the Lord.”

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 27-29, Psalms 68

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May 21, 2022

Generosity

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 27-29, Psalms 68

The global economy lost trillions due to the pandemic. Throw in natural disasters like hurricanes and super-cyclones or historic droughts and locust plagues and and some of the poorest people in the world are now in danger of a famine of biblical proportions according to the latest news from the WHO and UN. They are setting up emergency operations in the most vulnerable countries in order to help provide food security during a time when global supply chains are disrupted and local markets shut down due to violence in places like Ukraine and the lingering effects of the virus. It's heartbreaking. Some ask where is God in the midst of all of this? I believe God turns that question back to us. Where are you? Where are my people? Why do you not take what I have given you and use it to bless others in my name? You see, the reality is God has given us all we need to take care of every single human need in the world today. According to the New York Times, it would take 10 billion dollars a year to provide clean drinking water to the world. Sounds like a lot, doesn't it? It's 1/10 of what Europe spends on alcohol each year and about half of what the US spends on dog food. According to the UN, it would take about 30 billion a year to provide food security for those living in desperate hunger. According to the WHO, it would cost $58/person to provide everyone with access to basic healthcare. About 371 billion by 2030. The impact? 97 million premature deaths could be averted, including more than 50 million children who currently do not live to see their 5th birthday. 20 million deaths from non-communicable diseases like diabetes, cancer, and heart disease could be prevented. Life expectancy is estimated to jump by potentially 3-9 years. Incredible!

How do we get from here to there? How do we become a more generous people? The kind of givers God loves? King David shows us the way. First and foremost, we must love God supremely. We must love God more than our wealth. More than our lifestyles. More than our safety. More than our comfort. We must love God with our whole hearts. Listen to what David tells his son Solomon. "And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will cast you off forever." (1 Chronicles 28:9) Essentially, the key to Solomon's success. The key to his kingship will be his love for God.

Second, we must recognize God is the giver of all good gifts. "Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name." (1 Chronicles 29:10-13) We don't own a single thing. Everything we have comes from God's own hands. He chose the place of our birth. He endowed us with gifts and talents and abilities. He sovereignly orchestrated the opportunities we've been given. All these things were outside our control and yet they are the secret to our success. Of course we work hard. Of course we do our best. We are not passive in this process. But the foundation of whatever success we've achieved in this life was not laid by our own hands but by God Himself.

Third, we must acknowledge we are unworthy of such divine attention. "But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding." (1 Chronicles 29:14-15) The world is constantly

telling us we “deserve” all we have. We’ve “earned” all we’ve received. We are “good” and “righteous” and “worth” every penny of our wealth. The Bible calls this a lie. We are unworthy sinners. Unworthy of God’s attention. Unworthy to come into His presence. We are sinners in desperate need of grace. Our days are like a shadow. There is no abiding. In a generation or two, all we have accomplished will be dust and no one will even remember our names. But God loves us. He has dealt bountifully with us. He has secured for us an eternal home in the heavens if we will receive His greatest gift…Jesus.

Fourth, once we’ve set our hearts on Christ. Once we’ve acknowledged God as the “sole proprietor” of this world and all that is in it. Once we’ve humbled ourselves in our unworthiness before Him. Our hearts and hands quite naturally open. Our fists unclench. Our fears and doubts fade. And we give. Give generously. Freely. Cheerfully. “I know, my God, that you test the heart and have pleasure in uprightness. In the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you. O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you.” (1 Chronicles 29:17-18)

When it comes to your money...is your heart directed towards God? When it comes to your wealth...do you see it as a tool in God’s hand? In these uncertain times, do you find yourself holding tighter onto what you have? Hunkering down? Doing all you can to preserve your lifestyle? Or are you becoming even more generous? Even more sacrificial as you see the needs around you grow? We face these same questions as a church. We’ve been blessed. Through careful stewardship, we’re debt free and stable financially. To whom much is given, much is expected. It’s why we’ve sent money through the Petros Network to places like Ethiopia. It’s why we’ve given funds to Bishop John Rucyahana in Rwanda as he seeks to serve the poorest of the poor. It’s why we’ve sent money to help Pastor Martin rebuild in South Sudan. It’s why we support clean water projects with Peter Halder in Bangladesh. And we’re seeking to do even more. Not just around the world but in our own backyard as well. We are about to break ground on a long-awaited youth building so we can serve Parker students and their families. We launched Douglas County Christian Counseling so we can meet the growing mental health needs among the underserved in our community. If you are looking for an opportunity to respond to God’s Word today, prayerfully consider joining us at PEPC as we seek to answer God’s call to give generously to His Kingdom work!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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May 23, 2022

A Life of Blessing

Readings for today: Psalms 111-118

I have been reading a book recently titled, “The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World.” The authors are the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu. It is essentially an interview, the last one between the two dear friends, before Archbishop Tutu died. In the book, both men agree that we create so much of our own suffering. We have this innate selfishness about us that is the root of much of our pain and frustration. We are naturally inclined to be greedy and gluttonous. We seem addicted to pleasure and give little thought to those in need around us. To put it in biblical terms, we too easily “gratify the desires of the sinful nature” which creates a negative ripple effect on the world around us. What’s the antidote to pervasive disease? Giving ourselves away to others. Compassionate concern for those who are less fortunate. Deliberately choosing to deny ourselves so that others around us might flourish. Living in radically generous ways. Being open-handed with all that we have to help those in need. Focusing on the well-being of others is the surest and truest path to joy.

The Psalmist agrees. Blessed is the one who fears the Lord. Light dawns in the darkness for the one who is upright. It goes well with the one who is generous and just. The righteous will never be moved. They will be remembered forever. They are immune to fear for they place their trust in the Lord. They are steady and non-anxious for they know their victory over this world is secure. Only the righteous person is truly free for they are not bound to the things of this world. They do not love the things of this world. They store up their treasures in heaven. This allows them to distribute freely. To walk with open hands and live with an open heart. This is the life God promises to those who will follow Him.

We live in such an anxious world. More and more people suffer from anxiety disorders and depression. They medicate with alcohol and marijuana and opioids. There is so much anger and hatred in our world. Violence is on the rise. Pain and suffering are becoming more and more unbearable. It’s heartbreaking to witness. As a pastor, I often have a front row seat as people seek my counsel. They come into my office or grab coffee with me down at Fika and they want to know why things are so hard. They want to know why life is so difficult. They want to know where God is in the midst of all they are going through. Sadly, as I listen to them share, I see the same self-centered patterns emerge. They are often the victim of their own sinful choices. They spend years ignoring God and then are surprised when life doesn’t go their way. They justify their selfish attitudes and actions. They rationalize away their sin. They don’t really want to make the changes God requires. So their suffering only deepens. If only they would turn to God! If only they would delight in His commands! God has tremendous blessings stored up for those who commit their way to Him. For those who seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness. If you want to live a life free from fear, give your life over to Christ. Love Him by obeying His commands. Put on His righteousness like a garment. Let Him cover you with His peace.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 1-2, Psalms 37, 71, 94

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May 24, 2022

Resisting Evil

Readings for today: 1 Kings 1-2, Psalms 37, 71, 94

It is easy to “fret yourself because of evildoers.” It’s easy to watch the news or scroll through social media and focus on all that is negative. All that is wrong with the world. It is easy to focus on the unrighteous and their manipulation, oppression, and greed. It is easy to give in to anger and hate. To lash out at those who perpetrate abuse and violence. There’s something deep inside all of us that longs for revenge. Longs to see those who do evil get what’s coming to them. We get frustrated when they seem to prosper. We lose heart when they get ahead. We question the justice of God when the wicked seemingly get away with all their plots and schemes.

Once again, the Psalmist gives voice to how we feel. He speaks directly to our hearts and points us to God. He helps us reframe our understanding and teaches us God’s eternal perspective. Do not be envious of those who do wrong. They will fade like the grass. Do not fret over the one who carries out evil. For they will be cut off. In the grand scheme of things, the evil only prosper for a moment but it is the righteous and the meek and the godly who will inherit the earth. Our job is not to seek revenge but to trust in the Lord and do good. Delight ourselves in God and commit ourselves to walk in His ways. If we will remain faithful, God promises to make our light shine. He promises us an eternal inheritance and the blessing of peace. He promises to uphold the righteous and never let us be put to shame. He promises to establish our steps and provide for our needs and give us a future.

This isn’t easy. Our world is growing more chaotic by the day. Evil is rising up all around us. Evil people are taking advantage of the instability to hoard power and wealth and influence. They plot against the righteous. They draw the sword. The bend the bow. Their goal is the destruction of the godly. The oppression of the poor and needy. They are a curse. They sow fear. They spread anxiety. They will stop at nothing until they achieve their sinful, selfish, unrighteous ends. But God sees them and laughs. He knows their day is coming. He will execute judgment on them and cut them off forever. So place your trust in the Lord. Make Him your stronghold in times of trouble. Seek His help. Deliverance and salvation come from His hand. Take refuge in Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 119:1-88

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May 25, 2022

Jesus is Better

Readings for today: Psalms 119:1-88

The way of Jesus is better. His ways are better than our ways. His thoughts are better than our thoughts. His wisdom is deeper. His knowledge is higher. His understanding unsearchable. He knows what is good for us. He blazed the trail of righteousness. He paved the narrow road that leads to salvation. Why in the world would we not want to follow Him? Why try to make our own way? Do we actually believe we know better than God? Are we actually so foolish as to think we can make our way in this world on our own?

Psalm 119 is a song of praise for the commandments of the Lord. It's a declaration of love for the law of God. A promise of fidelity to the ways of God. At first, it may sound strange to our ears. We who have been saved by grace tend to dismiss God's law as irrelevant to our lives. We who fear any form of works-righteousness tend to practice avoidance when it comes to God's commands. We don't want to play the Pharisee or be accused of legalism so we swing the pendulum to the other extreme and simply ignore what God has to say in His Word. The result is an impoverished life with God. An impotent life with God. A life that lacks any kind of spiritual power or vitality or lasting joy or enduring peace.

One cannot reasonably expect to experience God when we are constantly trying to avoid Him. One cannot reasonably expect to receive the blessings of God when we refuse to submit our lives to Him. One cannot reasonably expect to inherit the promises of God when we will not listen or obey Him. There is only one path to peace. There is only one way to dwell in safety and security in this world. There is only one road that leads us back to our eternal home and it is the one Jesus Himself walked for us. Jesus loved the law of God. Jesus kept His Father's commands. Jesus lived a sinless and blameless life and He said anyone who would come after Him must do the same. Anyone who would love Him must keep His commands. Friends, this isn't about earning God's favor or buying God's blessings or working to achieve our own salvation. Rather it is about trusting God. It's about submitting our lives to Him. It's about surrendering our will to His will and letting Him be our guide.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 3-4, 2 Chronicles 1, Psalms 72

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May 26, 2022

Ask and You Shall Receive

Readings for today: 1 Kings 3-4, 2 Chronicles 1, Psalm 72

“At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, "Ask what I shall give you." (1 Kings 3:5)

Put yourself in Solomon’s shoes as you read today. You have a glorious vision of God. He literally bends the heavens to come down and enter your dreams as you sleep. He says to you, “What shall I give to you?” “What is it you want?” “Tell me your heart’s desire and I will make it happen.” What would you say? How would you ask for?

Don’t let yourself respond too quickly. Take a moment. Let the Spirit search your heart as you ponder and reflect. As you think, let me encourage you to get in touch with your deepest fears. We all have them. Secret fears we harbor in our hearts that we spend a lifetime running from or protecting ourselves from. So much of how we choose to live our lives is in response to primordial fears we all carry inside. Fear of failure. Fear of not having enough. Fear of being unsafe. Fears for our children or our children’s children. Fear of insignificance. Fear of disease. Fear of death. What do you think Solomon was afraid of? As a young man, he had just inherited a powerful kingdom in the Middle East. (Not the safest or calmest place in the world, especially back then!) He was surrounded by powerful neighbors with powerful armies. He faced enemies both at home and abroad. As fabulous as his wealth was, it was fleeting in the ancient world. It could be here today and gone tomorrow. There was no FCC to guarantee his money. His people were looking to him for guidance and wisdom. What if he failed? What if he couldn’t live up to his father’s incredible legacy? All eyes turned to him as he ascended the throne. Would he be able to hold it? Would he preside over a period of peace and prosperity or would the nation crumble under his leadership? What if famines struck? What if the rains didn’t come? What if harvests failed? Plagues struck his livestock? So much responsibility at such a young age!

I imagine Solomon’s dreams were often filled with anxiety and fear. The pressure to perform had to be enormous. So when the Lord came to him with this question - “What shall I give to you?” - Solomon responds from the depths of his heart. “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?” (1 Kings 3:9) Centuries later, a man named James would encourage God’s people to pray a similar prayer. “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” (James 1:5) It’s a potent prayer. Transcending time and place and circumstance. Solomon is clearly not simply focused on the present or even the short-term. He knows the challenges he will face. He knows the years will weigh heavy. He knows there will be trials and tribulations and struggles and heartache. He knows all of this and so he asks for divine wisdom to make good decisions for the sake of God’s people. How selfless! How humble! How insightful!

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus teaches His disciples, saying, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” (Matthew 7:7) Isn’t that amazing? Essentially, Jesus is asking his disciples the same question He once asked Solomon. What is it you want? Ask and I will give it to you! Seek it out and I will show it to you! Be persistant in prayer and I will open the door for you. I will let you into my presence. I will answer all your questions. I will meet all your needs. I will give you what your heart desires.

Wait a minute, you say! That cannot be true! We've all prayed lots of prayers that were never answered! We've all prayed lots of prayers that just seemed to bounce off the ceiling! We've all prayed lots of prayers and gotten the silent treatment - so we thought - from the Lord. So what's really going on here? What's Jesus really saying?

Jesus is no genie. We are not given a magic lamp. Expressing to God our deepest desires and deepest needs is not the same as making three wishes! God probes the deepest recesses of our hearts. Psalm 42:7 describes it like this, "Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me." The Apostle Paul says it like this in Romans 8:26-27, "For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." This is why Paul can say with confidence that God works all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose! Because God responds to the deepest needs of the human heart. The needs we can't give voice to. The needs we don't want to admit to. The needs are most afraid to express.

The most amazing thing about Solomon is that he's in touch with his needs. He knows he is weak. He knows he is young. He knows he is immature. He knows he is unable to carry the burden that has been placed on his shoulders. He acknowledges all of this and his prayer therefore comes from that deep place within as he asks for divine wisdom to bear up under the challenges that will come. Are you in touch with your deepest needs? Have you spent time reflecting on your fears? Have you come face to face with your failures? Do you acknowledge your weakness and insignificance and are you willing to bring it before God? This, friends, is prayer. Humble. Heartfelt. Authentic. Real. Honest to goodness prayer. And such prayers God will never dismiss or despise!

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 119:89-176

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May 27, 2022

Wisdom vs. Foolishness

Readings for today: Psalms 119:89-176

A few years ago I read a book that helped me parse the difference between wisdom and foolishness. Wisdom, according to the author, is when we see the truth and adjust our lives accordingly. Foolishness, on the other hand, is when we demand that truth adjust to our reality. To put it another way, wise people will meet the demands of life while foolish people will demand that life meet their demands. Wise people receive feedback when it is given. They own their own performance, mistakes, and issues and take responsibility without externalizing blame or giving excuses. Foolish people become defensive very quickly when confronted. They refuse to own their own shortcomings and often externalize by blaming those around them. Wise people listen. Fools dismiss or ignore.

Are you a wise person or a fool? How do you know? Well, how do you feel as you read the words from Psalm 119? What happens internally when you consider the demands of God's Law? Are you the kind of person who embraces God's commandments, however imperfectly? Are they your delight? Do you find yourself seeking to bend your life in submission to what God has revealed in His Word? Or are you the kind of person who resists God's laws? Dismisses them? Ignores them? Rationalizes away your sin? When you read or engage God's Word, do you seek to bend it to your will? Your life? Your desires? Or do you seek to submit your life to Him? Are you a wise person or a fool?

The Psalmist is clearly wise...

"I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life..."

"Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day..."

"How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"

"Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way."

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

"Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart."

"The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever."

(Psalms 119:93, 97, 103-105, 111, 160)

The Psalmist loves God's Word. Loves God's Law. Loves God's commands. The Psalmist seeks to do all he can to adjust his life to God's Will. To live his life under God's sovereign rule and authority. He makes no excuses for his sin. He doesn't hide his shortcomings. He faces his failures honestly and transparently.

Sadly, so many in our culture today are fools. Even more tragically, they sit in our pews and attend our worship services. As the Apostle Paul says in Romans 10:2, they have a "zeal for God but not according to knowledge." They love God but not in the way He deserves or demands. Instead, they "do what is right in their own eyes." They bend God's truth to their reality. They seek to make God's Word

null and void either through outright rejection or simple ignorance. They refuse to submit their lives to His will. As a result, they live lives of quiet desperation. They are not evil people. They do not have bad intentions. They simply are misguided. As Paul says in Romans 1, “Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools...” (Romans 1:21-22)

Let me be the first to say this all too often describes me! On some level. At certain seasons. In particular circumstances throughout the course of my life, I have tried to bend God’s will to my own. I have tried to rationalize away my sin. I have tried to make twist and turn God’s Law to make it fit my life. To no avail. I have thrown myself against the will of God so many times until I finally broke. Finally surrendered. And with that surrender has come wisdom. Not perfection. Wisdom. Self-knowledge. Self-understanding. Seeing myself for who I truly am, warts and all. And learning to trust God’s ways above my ways. God’s thoughts more than my thoughts. God’s will more than my feelings. This is what it means to be wise, friends. The fear of the Lord truly is the beginning of wisdom!

Readings for tomorrow: Song of Solomon 1:1-5:1

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May 28, 2022

Sex and God

Readings for today: Song of Solomon 1:1-5:1

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

But what is the book about? The love of a man for a woman? The love of God for His church? Perhaps both? Are we comfortable thinking about our relationship with God in sexual terms? Or is that a bridge too far? I firmly believe the Bible is inviting us to approach God in the most intimate of ways. The language of the Song is meant to arouse. Meant to touch the deepest places of our hearts. Meant to draw us into intimate embrace with the Father.

Our inability to embrace this book only reveals how corrupt our understanding of human sexuality has become. We see it as dirty yet pleasurable. Something to be enjoyed and yet something to be feared. Our culture boasts of sexual freedom and yet is shocked when such unfettered freedom leads to abuse and violence. If there's anything the #MeToo movement has taught us is that our sexual appetites are almost impossible to satisfy. Sexuality without restraint is actually destructive and traumatic.

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: None

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May 30, 2022

Desperate for God

Readings for today: Song of Solomon 5:2-7:13, 8:14, Psalms 45

Two Fridays ago, I helped lead a commissioning service for 330 church planters in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia. These men and women are headed out to three different regions of their country where they will preach the gospel and plant churches in unreached villages. They know they will face significant persecution. Their lives will be threatened. They will endure incredible hardship and poverty. Some of them will even give their lives for the sake of the Kingdom of God. And yet, as we prayed over them, they wept at the privilege of being counted worthy to share in the sufferings of Christ. As each group returned to their seats after the prayer time, they burst out in spontaneous, joyous singing. Their hearts are pure so I know they will see God. They hunger and thirst for righteousness so I know the Spirit will fill them. They will be persecuted for righteousness' sake so I know they will inherit the kingdom of heaven.

What is the secret to such deep and abiding faith? Desperation for God. These men and women exhibit a devotion to God that is awe-inspiring. They have nothing and yet have everything. Everyday is filled with hardship, suffering, and pain and yet they keep their eyes on Jesus. The challenges they face are enormous and overwhelming and yet they trust God is on their side. It's incredible. It reminds me of the desperation we read about in today's reading out of the Song of Solomon. The woman searching the streets at night for her beloved. She too endured beatings and bruisings. She too endured suffering and shame. And yet should could not get the vision of her beloved out of her mind or off her heart.

"My beloved is radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand. His head is the finest gold; his locks are wavy, black as a raven. His eyes are like doves besides streams of water, bathed in milk, sitting beside a full pool. His cheeks are like beds of spices, mounds of sweet-smelling herbs. His lips are lilies, dripping liquid myrrh. His arms are rods of gold, set with jewels. His body is polished ivory, bedecked with sapphires. His legs are alabaster columns, set on bases of gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as the cedars. His mouth is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable. This is my beloved and this is my friend…" (Song of Solomon 5:10-16)

Is this your vision of God? Is this how you see and understand your beautiful Savior, Jesus Christ? Does the vision of Jesus fire your devotion? Capture your attention? Fill your dreams? Is He your supreme treasure? Is He your most precious thought? Do you consider your relationship with Him to be the most special in your life? Is it hard to wait to spend time with Him? Do you find yourself longing for worship each week? Does serving Him bring you great joy? Are you excited to share Him with others? A lot depends on how you answer these questions. If your answer is "yes" to them all, praise God! Your life is marked by a desperation for Jesus that only He can fill and the great news of the gospel is that He will indeed satisfy every longing of your heart! If your answer is "no" or "I don't know" or "I'm not sure", then I encourage you to turn to prayer. Fall on your knees before the One who loves you most and ask Him to give you a deeper hunger and a greater thirst for righteousness. Confess those things that distract you or draw your attention away from Christ. Lay them at His feet. Empty yourself of anything that would compete for your love for Jesus and let Him fill you with His grace in return.
Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 1-4

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May 31, 2022

Living with Wisdom

Readings for today: Proverbs 1-4

Our world suffers from an acute lack of wisdom. Where wisdom is lacking, there can be no righteousness. No justice. No equity. No understanding. No discretion. No learning. No guidance. Instead, we are like a rudderless ship on the ocean. Completely at the mercy of the wind and waves. We are like a hiker in the wilderness without a compass. Lost and aimlessly wandering. We are like a plane flying through a deep fog with no guidance system. We have no idea if we are right side up or upside down. The results are devastating. A dramatic rise in anxiety and fear, violence and suffering, hate and outrage. We are like a raw nerve, lashing out at anything and everything that touches us.

The Bible is clear. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. If we want wisdom and insight and knowledge and understanding, we must turn to the Lord. Only God can teach us the meaning of righteousness and justice and equity. Only God can bring about peace and rest and satisfaction and fulfillment. Only God can save us from our sin. The harsh reality is we are our own worst enemy. We create so much of our own suffering. We are prone to violence. We are vulnerable to greed. We run towards evil. We selfishly pursue our own ends.

And yet wisdom still cries aloud in the streets! She raises her voice in the public square. She preaches at the gates of the city. Constantly calling us to repent. Calling us to humble ourselves before God. Calling us to fear the Lord. Those who turn aside to listen soon find themselves filled with the Holy Spirit. They find comfort for their anxious hearts. They find rest for their weary souls. This is the promise of God for those who will return to Him. If we receive God's Word and treasure His commands, we will dwell secure. We will walk in God's favor. We will be blessed beyond all measure.

Friends, God is generous. He gives wisdom to all who would ask, holding nothing back. He makes Himself a shield to the upright. He guards them as they walk the paths of justice. He watches over the ways of His saints. He is with them in the valley of the shadow. He prepares a feast for them in the presence of even their fiercest enemies. He makes their cup to overflow. This is what God wants for your life if you will simply commit your way to Him!

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 5-8

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June 1 2022

Temptation

Readings for today: Proverbs 5-8

It begins with a thought. An attraction. A second glance. Something forbidden catches our attention and the enemy is right there. He's a smooth talker. Delighting in leading us astray. We take our eyes off of Jesus. The horizon shrinks to the immediate. We give no thought as to where this leads. We only feel the desire growing within us. If we could take a step back, we know where it will go. Nowhere. A dead end. So a battle ensues. A fight within. A struggle between life and death.

When Solomon describes the temptress, he's not just talking about sex. He's describing in great detail what takes place within the heart of every human being as they wrestle with sin. Our battle with sin is not rational. It doesn't take place in the mind so much as in the heart. The seat of our desires. And it is extremely difficult to resist. It's why Solomon encourages his son to stay as far away as possible. To avoid any situation where temptation may arise. "Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house…" (Prov. 5:8) Instead, he encourages him to focus on what he already has. What God has already given him. "Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well." (Prov. 5:15)

Unfortunately, we do not take Solomon's words to heart. We believe we can fly close to the sun. We believe we can walk right up to the edge without going over. "Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched?" (Prov. 6:27-28) Over and over again, I have seen this happen. Not just in my life but in the lives of so many I love and serve as pastor. Mistakes are made. Betrayals. Brokenness. And every time we talk it through. Trace it back. Untangle the mess. It begins with this attitude that we are somehow much stronger than we think. And that's why Solomon says, "He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is led astray." (Prov. 5:23)

Resisting sin is part and parcel of the Christian life. The ancients called it the "mortification of the flesh." Paul talks about putting to death his fleshly desires. What does this look like in your life? And do you resist in faith or in your own strength? Friends, we cannot white-knuckle our sobriety. The only way to defeat temptation is to look to Christ. To focus all our attention and all our love and all our devotion on Him. When His love fills our hearts, there is no room for anything else.

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 9-12

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June 2, 2022

The Integrated Life

Readings for today: Proverbs 9-12

“Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad.” (Prov. 12:25)

I know so many who struggle with anxiety. They are young and old. They are male and female. They are black, white, and brown. They are rich and poor. Gay, straight, and bi. They come from all different backgrounds and life experiences. No one is immune. Many studies have been done attempting to pinpoint the source but the reality is there are a multiplicity of factors involved. For example, consider the factor of isolation. Despite tools like social media, people report feeling more disconnected than ever. Fewer and fewer report having a good friend. Someone they can call at 2AM if they have a need. This feeling of isolation leads to busyness as people fill up their schedules with all kinds of activities, longing to connect. But the opposite happens. The busier we become, the harder it is for us to connect and the more isolated we feel. Add to this all the stress we carry from our jobs, families, health, finances, etc. and it’s actually not hard to see why we are so anxious.

Anxiety in a person’s heart does indeed weigh them down. Saps them of their strength. Wears them out. Impacts their physical health. Their mental acuity. Their emotional stability. It hits every system in the body until we are debilitated. Unable to function on some level. So what’s the answer? Walking in integrity. “Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but he who makes his ways crooked will be found out.” (Prov. 10:9) Now, at first blush, that may seem strange. Doesn’t integrity have to do with honesty? Are you suggesting if we just tell the truth, we’ll all be okay? Certainly that’s part of it. But integrity has a deeper meaning as well. Just as buildings have a “structural integrity” so do human beings. Strong lives are built on strong foundations. They are built on strong, godly habits that keep us secure. When we walk in integrity with the Lord, He becomes our stronghold. Our refuge. Our fortress. And we are able to put aside all anxious thoughts. When we make Christ the foundation of our life. When we build our daily lives around godly rhythms. Christ promises we will experience a peace that passes all understanding.

So what are some of those godly rhythms? What does it mean to live with integrity before the Lord? It starts with humility. Humble submission to Christ. Surrendering to His Lordship over our lives. On this foundation, we layer daily prayer and reflection in the Scriptures. We layer in weekly worship with our church family. We layer in regular intentional time with a few Christian friends. We layer in service to others. Giving ourselves away for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Spiritual disciplines such as these become the four walls of a spiritual house that is strong and firm and secure because it is built with the Lord.

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 13-16

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June 3, 2022

Righteousness

Readings for today: Proverbs 13-16

I've been thinking a lot about righteousness the last few weeks especially as word went around that the Southern Baptist Church would release their long-awaited report on sexual abuse in the church. Commissioned last summer by delegates to their annual meeting, the independent investigation covers a twenty year period during which top denominational leaders suppressed abuse claims, rejected reform efforts, and dismissed victims and their families. Hundreds of abusers were identified, including past presidents, and yet it seems clear the leadership was more interested in avoiding liability rather than pursuing justice. Investigators interviewed 330 people, including 22 accusers, and were given access to literal mounds of data including email correspondence from survivors and denominational leaders. Tragically, the pattern that emerges is all too common. At least in my experience. Leaders close ranks, trying to protect the reputations of their friends as well as the institutions they lead. They are highly suspicious of any accusation and are more than willing to give abusers the benefit of the doubt. They refuse to be transparent about their practices and often try to operate in secret so they can control the flow of information. Perhaps most egregiously, they attack and blame the victims and their families in an effort to avoid accountability. None of this is unique to the Southern Baptists. The Roman Catholic Church is still attempting to redress their own hideous past as are many non-denominational evangelical churches whose leaders turned a blind eye to horrific abuse in their midst. Of course, the secular world has their own issues as well. Consider the abuse scandals that plague Hollywood or Washington D.C. or many corporate board rooms across America. It seems almost ubiquitous.

When will we ever learn? Our ways simply are not God's ways. Our ways are naturally corrupted by selfishness and greed which is why they always lead to death. (Prov. 14:12) Our ways seem right in our own eyes but God is constantly judging the intentions of our hearts. (Prov. 16:12) Do we somehow think God is blind to our sin? Do we think we can actually hide our wrongdoing from Him? What foolishness! (Prov. 15:3) No, the way of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord. (Prov. 15:9) His evil will become his undoing. (Prov. 14:32) In fact, the Lord refuses to have any association with wickedness and evil. (Prov. 15:29) He will not bless sin or abuse or lies or oppression. These things become a reproach and a shame to any church, organization, or nation who tolerates them. (Prov. 14:34)

So why do we keep falling into this trap? Why do these abuse cycles seem forever on repeat? When human beings abandon righteousness for the sake of power or greed or influence or a platform, they seemingly can justify just about anything. Our ability to sin is exceeded only by our ability to rationalize away such sin. The reality is we tend to tolerate certain levels of sin in our lives because to root them out would compromise our position or our lifestyle or our reputation and we simply refuse to let that happen. We circle the wagons. Retreat behind bureaucracy. Weaponize our policies and procedures. Lock down in self-protection mode. That's why God says, "Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues (or power or platform or influence) with injustice." We simply cannot have it both ways.

Read through today's chapters again. Take a look at how Solomon describes the life of the righteous. It's a life of peace and security. A life of honesty and transparency. A life of beauty and wisdom. A life that blesses others and is blessed by God. My prayer for all of us today is that we would hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God above all other worldly things.

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 17-20

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June 4, 2022

The Power of Words

Readings for today: Proverbs 17-20

Words are powerful. They can be used to bless and build up. They can be used to comfort and encourage. They can be used to inspire and motivate. Sadly they can also be used to curse and tear down. They can be used to wound and discourage. They can be used to shame and condemn. The old adage, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me” simply doesn’t pass muster. We’ve all been hurt by the things someone has said or left unsaid. We all carry deep wounds from things that were said to us as young children or young adults by those in authority in our lives. At the same time, we also can recall vivid memories when words were shared with us that left a positive impression. Words that healed or uplifted or perhaps even changed the course of our lives.

Today’s reading carries a strong warning to us to watch how we use our words. “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.” (Prov. 18:21) Normally when I read this verse and the many others like it that are sprinkled throughout the Scriptures, I think of rash words. Words said in anger. Words said in frustration. Words intended to hurt. Words used as weapons. Words said in ignorance. And I do believe these are exactly the kind of words Solomon is referring to when he writes things like, “A fool's lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating.” However, serving in an alternative cultural context recently reminded me of yet another layer of meaning.

When I am preparing for one of my trips, I usually have a few people ask me how I will communicate. They ask if the local church planters I train speak English. They do not. They ask me if I have learned to speak any of the local languages like Oromifa or Amharic. I have not with the exception of a few words like “hello” and “thank you.” They then ask about the interpreter and what that experience is like. It isn’t always easy. The challenge for the interpreter is not only communicate the words being spoken but the meaning being conveyed as well, all at the same emotional level as the original speaker. Whew! The best interpreters are able to do all three but it is a monumental challenge! My friend Behailu is one of the most brilliant I have met as are many of the other interpreters I’ve been blessed to have along the way.

The other thing I learn through this process is to confront my self-centeredness. When people ask about the translation process, I used to say, “They don’t speak English so I use an interpreter.” It’s a subtle but important nuance as basically I am saying “they” are lacking because “they” don’t speak my language so I must “help” them by getting an interpreter. Do you see how I’ve centered myself? The better and more humble way to put it would be to say, “I don’t speak Amharic or Oromifa so I need an interpreter.” This puts the focus back on my weakness as a monolingual American. Does that make sense?

Both my use of language and my self-centeredness can make or break a cross-cultural relationship. It’s only by the grace of God that my “mouth hasn’t invited a beating” on any number of occasions where I was culturally insensitive. And because I teach things like theology and leadership, I have marveled that my ignorance of local customs, lingual nuances, etc. doesn’t get more in the way. Again, all credit is due to the Holy Spirit as well as to the brilliance of the translators I get to work with when I am overseas.

The key to harnessing the power of the tongue is to bring every thought captive to Christ. To run every thought. Every emotion. Every idea we have through the grid that is Christ and ask ourselves if it

honors Him. Chances are high that we are truly seeking to honor Christ with our lips, we will not speak careless words. We will not cling to our cultural privilege. We will not center ourselves but rather center Christ in our relationships. We will not throw gasoline on the fire of a conflict but instead use gentle words to turn away wrath. We will speak positive words to bring hope. Loving words to ward off hate. You see, the power of the tongue works both ways. It can be used for good as much as evil. It can uplift as much as it tears down. In my experience, simply using my words to bless others makes a huge impact. How can you use your words today to bring about the blessing of God in someone's life?

Readings for tomorrow: None

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June 6, 2022

Pride

Readings for today: Proverbs 21-24

"Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, are sin…"Scoffer" is the name of the arrogant, haughty man who acts with arrogant pride." (Prov. 21:4, 24)

There is no greater sin than pride. Pride lies at the root of all sin. It was pride caused Satan to fall from grace and glory when the heavens were young. It was pride that caused Adam and Eve to reject God's command and go their own way. Cain's pride was wounded so he killed Abel. It was Joseph's pride that got him in trouble with his brothers. In his pride, Moses thought he could deliver Israel without God. Saul, in his pride, refused to make right sacrifices. David's pride caused him to number Israel so he could see how powerful he was. Solomon, in his pride, thought he could worship lots of different gods and still remain faithful to Yahweh. Over and over again in the Scriptures, we see pride creep up in God's people with devastating effect.

Pride is still our greatest sin. Pride makes us think we know best how to live our lives. Pride makes us think we can stand in judgment over God's Word and determine what is relevant. Pride makes us think we are like God, discerning good from evil. But how's that working out? When we look at the world around us, is it not pride that is the root cause of the violence? The suffering? The pain? Is it not the pride of nations that causes them to go to war? Is it not the pride of privilege that causes some to look down on others? Is it not the pride of wealth that causes us to accumulate more and more while others go without? Is it not pride that drives our decision-making on a daily basis? We do what's best for us first without a thought for others. Haughty. Proud. Wicked. Scoffer. Arrogant. These are the labels God uses for us when we fall into this trap.

So what's the answer? Humility. Not thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought. Or less of ourselves than we ought. But simply thinking of ourselves less. When we think of ourselves "less." When we consider others before we consider ourselves. When we have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus who – though He was God – did not consider His prerogatives as God something to hold onto. We begin to become humble. We take on the form of a servant. We begin to look like Jesus. And humility comes with its own reward. "The reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honor and life." (Prov. 22:4) God blesses the humble. God blesses those who put Him first. Who put others first. He grants them His favor and they often find the very things they were chasing so hard after coming into their life. The difference, of course, is that these things no longer have any hold on us because Christ now has the tighter grip.

So are you a humble person? Are you the kind of person who needs compliments? Needs to be told how good you are? Are you the kind of person who hates compliments? Hate it when you are recognized for something you did? Both are signs of pride, friends. Are you the kind of person who receives rebuke? Correction? Critique? Or do you grow resentful and angry? Are you the kind of person who crumbles at the first sign of disapproval? All are signs of pride, friends. God wants you to think of yourself less. The truly humble person accepts honor and praise for the things they do well because they recognize God has blessed them. The truly humble person is generous with praise of others. Looks for opportunities to build others up. To spread the praise while taking responsibility for any failures. The truly humble person rejects any attempt of the enemy to make them feel worthless, afraid, or of less value in the eyes of God. A truly humble person is free because they do not live for praise nor in fear of praise. So are you a humble person? Pray for God to show you the way.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 5-6, 2 Chronicles 2-3

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June 7, 2022

Building God's House

Readings for today: 1 Kings 5-6, 2 Chronicles 2-3

"Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in my statutes and obey my rules and keep all my commandments and walk in them, then I will establish my word with you, which I spoke to David your father. And I will dwell among the children of Israel and will not forsake my people Israel." (1 Kings 6:12-13)

We recently remodeled our sanctuary. It was a big project. It required a significant investment of time, energy, and resources. The process from beginning to end spanned a couple of years. It required a design team, architect, construction firm, A/V integrators, and scores of volunteers. As we prayerfully sought God's will for the space, we recognized that it would be so easy to give into the temptation to follow current cultural trends. Eliminate everything distinctive about our worship space. Get rid of key elements like the cross or the table or the baptismal font so we didn't offend non-believers. At the same time time, we also recognized our need to "translate" our worship experience for the next generation. A generation of digital natives. A generation who will seamlessly interact online and in person. As much as we might wish it were otherwise, livestream worship is now a required feature for any church seeking to reach the lost in their community. It is the new "front door" of the church. All of these factors came into play as we came before the Lord in prayer. More than anything else, we wanted the new space to reflect the glory and wonder and beauty and majesty of God. We wanted to make sure that the worship that took place in our space aligned with His revealed will for His people. For we want God to come and dwell with us. We want God to come and meet with us. We want God to root and establish us for many generations to come. It's a huge ask and yet we believe with all our hearts that it is God's desire for us.

Solomon believed the same. He knew the magnitude of what he was building. How in the world could any house built with human hands contain the Lord of the universe? How in the world could all the wealth of such a house reflect the fullness of God's glory? How in the world could any one man - even if he were the richest king on earth - accomplish such a significant project? Listen to how he describes the nature of his work, "The house I am to build will be great, for our God is greater than all gods. But who is able to build Him a house, since heaven, even highest heaven, cannot contain Him? Who am I to build a house for Him, except as a place to make offerings before Him?" (2 Chronicles 2:5-6) Clearly, Solomon was humbled by the work he was being called to do. He was daunted by the great task his father David had left to him. And yet he trusted God was with Him. He trusted God to guide Him and provide for Him. He knew the Lord loved His people and desired to dwell among them. As God had already declared so many times before, "He would be their God, they would be His people."

In a very real sense, all of us are engaged in the work of building God a house. We are building for glory or for ruin in the way we choose to live our lives. If we walk in God's ways and live according to His commands and love His Word, He will establish us. He will come to dwell with us. He will never leave us or forsake us. If we invite Him into our homes, into our families, and into our work; He promises to do great things in and through us. He promises to help us build lives that are strong and secure. Lives that can withstand any storm that may come because they are founded on the rock that is Jesus Christ. Is this daunting? Yes. Is it humbling to think that God would be that interested in how we conduct ourselves day to day? You bet. It's a huge task. One that will require all our focus and time and attention and resources if we are to be successful. But is this not our chief end? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever? As such, it will be worth every effort we expend.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 7-8, Psalms 11

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June 8, 2022

A Model Prayer

Readings for today: 1 Kings 7-8, Psalms 11

The prayer of King Solomon at the dedication of the Temple is one of my favorites in all of Scripture. It's serves as a great model for us as we think about our own prayer life. It begins with an ascription of praise for who God is and a recognition that He is utterly transcendent.

"O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walk before you with all their heart..." (1 Kings 8:23) Solomon acknowledges the greatness of God. His majesty. His glory. His splendor. He is not just one among many gods. He is alone is the true God of the heavens and the earth. He is also a God defined by faithfulness. Eternal loyalty. Steadfast love for His covenant people who are the humble recipients of His blessing. This attitude is truly the starting point of prayer. Prayer must begin with an understanding of who God is and who we are. We are not the same. We are not on the same level. God is the shepherd and we are the sheep. God is the potter and we are the clay. God is the king and we are his servants. Prayer place us in a humble position before the Lord. This is the ONLY posture one can take when they come before God in prayer.

"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O Lord my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day..." (1 Kings 8:27-28) As we come humbly before the Lord, we are assured of His promise to hear us. To listen. To attend to our prayers. God hears every word. Every cry. He sees every tear. He knows the secret thoughts of our hearts and He delights when we bring those before Him openly and honestly. Solomon makes it clear that the Temple's primary purpose is to serve as a house for prayer. A place where Israel can come before God and lay their requests before Him.

God not only listens to our requests, He also hears our confession. Throughout this prayer, Solomon acknowledges the inescapable reality of sin. It is ubiquitous. It is endemic. It is simply part of who we are as God's people. So when a man or woman sins. When God's people sin collectively. Whether against neighbor or friend. Through systems of oppression or abuse. When Israel suffers defeat at the hands of their enemies or the rains are shut up in the heavens or famine strikes the land. In those moments, if Israel will humble themselves and pray and seek God's face, God promises to hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land. He promises to "hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive and act and render to each whose heart you know..." (1 Kings 8:39)

God will do all these things in such a way as to make His name great upon the earth. Even in Solomon's prayer, there is a missional, outward-facing component. "Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far country for your name's sake (for they shall hear of your great name and your mighty hand, and of your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name." (1 Kings 8:41-43) God desires to fill the earth with His glory. Israel is called to serve this very purpose. In the way Israel orders her life and faithfully serves her Lord, she will be a witness to the nations and to all of creation of the steadfast love of God.

You can see why I love this prayer so much! As I said above, it is a great model for us to follow in our own lives as we ponder and reflect on our relationship with God. Because of Christ, Christians have access to the Father in ways Solomon, in all his wisdom, could never have imagined! Because Christ sits at the Father's right hand interceding for us continually, the door is always open. The way to the Holy of Holies always clear. We have a standing invitation to come before our Heavenly Father with the blessed assurance He will always listen. When you pray, pray with this eternal promise firmly fixed in your mind and heart.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 4-7, Psalms 134, 136

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June 9, 2022

Revival

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 4-7, Psalms 134, 136

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

What will it take to win our nation to Christ? I've spent countless hours praying over and pondering this question. I've traveled the world and asked this same question of believers in different countries, some far more hostile to the gospel than my own. I've watched different Christians in different places use different methods as they sought to win their nation for Jesus. Some use politics. Some use social protest. Some seek to leverage wealth and power. Some seek to build a platform and become an influencer.

The most effective method by far happens to be the most ancient. The most biblical. Plant churches. Evangelize the lost. Serve the world with humility, sacrificial love, and an abundance of grace. The time I spent in Ethiopia recently only reinforced this truth for me. As we meet with indigenous denominational leader after indigenous denominational leader, we hear the same thing. They each love their nation. They have a passion to see their people come to Christ. They are united in their efforts to reach the lost. So what are they doing? They are praying fervently. They are sending church planters to some of the hardest to reach areas of their country. Regions where warfare has recently raged. Regions where there is famine and potential starvation. Regions where there is tribal unrest. No hardship is too great. No suffering too much to endure. They "count everything as loss when compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ" and they are winning a nation to Him as a result.

Imagine what could happen if the US church would rediscover a similar passion? Imagine what could happen if believers in the US developed a passion for evangelism? Committed their time and resources and energies to planting churches in neighborhoods where there is no gospel presence? Imagine if we could put aside our denominational differences? Humbly repent of our sin? Imagine if instead of seeking to dominate, we instead sought to serve? After all, it is God's steadfast love - "hesed" in the original Hebrew - that leads to repentance and revival.

Do you pray for revival? Revival in God's Church? Revival in our nation? Revival in your own heart? For years now, this verse from 2 Chronicles has been lifted up as the model prayer for revival. So how do we put it into practice? We humble ourselves. Before the Lord. Before each other. Before the world. We are broken people. We are sinful people. We have no right to claim any moral high ground. We ask God to continue His sanctifying work in us. We beg the Holy Spirit to give us eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to understand the mind of Christ. We seek God's face. We stop believing the world revolves around us. We stop treating God like some on-call, cosmic concierge whose only purpose for existence is to meet our emotional needs. We stop treating worship like a consumer product and instead give God the worship He deserves in the way He demands. And finally, we turn from our wicked ways. We come clean. We confess. We repent. We make ourselves vulnerable and transparent before God, before each other, and before the world. Most importantly, we do these things authentically with no other agenda than to come clean before our Heavenly Father.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 146-150

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June 10, 2022

Give God the Praise He Deserves

Readings for today: Psalms 146-150

I love these final Psalms. They extol the greatness of God. I can imagine all of Israel gathered at the Temple singing them at the top of their lungs. Wave after wave of sound ascending to the heavens. Their hearts on fire. Their passion for God enflamed. Their love for Him crescendoing. Their worship overwhelming the senses. It's a powerful thing to witness.

As many of you know, I get the privilege of traveling to the Horn of Africa a couple of times a year. I love worshipping with my African brothers and sisters. Worship for them is a whole body experience. Dancing. Swaying. Clapping. They sing without any sense of self-conscious pride. No insecurities at all. No worries about the number of verses or choruses on repeat. No debates over personal preference. They simply sing from their hearts. Their joy is palpable. They love singing together. They love being together. They love worshipping before the Lord. It is powerful.

Like Israel, they praise the God "who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin." (Psalms 146:7-9) They recount God's goodness. They praise God's greatness. They sing about God's provision. God's protection. God's miraculous healing. God's deliverance from evil.

Like Israel, they praise the God who "determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure...He covers the heavens with clouds; he prepares rain for the earth; he makes grass grow on the hills. He gives to the beasts their food, and to the young ravens that cry...He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes...He sends out his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow and the waters flow." (Psalms 147:4-5, 8-9, 16, 18) During the rainy season they experience the tangible blessing of abundant water flowing, bringing life to their dry land. Flowers bloom. Crops flourish. Herds increase. The grasslands become rich and full and green.

Like Israel, they know when they praise their God, they are joining their voices with the heavens and the earth. The heavenly host and the saints who have gone before them. They join the great cloud of witnesses around the throne of God to give Him the worship due His Holy Name. "Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts! Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!" (Psalms 148:1-4)

I hope and pray for the day when our churches in the West can abandon themselves to worship in the way Israel once did! I hope and pray for the day when we can put aside all pretense and pride and self-consciousness and insecurity and consumeristic thoughts and attitudes and worship God like our African brothers and sisters! I long for the day when we would come face to face with our God. Honor Him for who He is. Worship Him in Spirit and in Truth. Give Him the praise He deserves. The worship He demands. Fall on our faces before His throne, casting all our crowns before Him. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 9, 2 Chronicles 8, Proverbs 25-26

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June 11, 2022

Define the Relationship

Readings for today: 1 Kings 9, 2 Chronicles 8, Proverbs 25-26

There comes a point in time in all relationships where you have to sit down and define the boundaries. You have talk through expectations and conditions and terms. You have to spell out what is in bounds and what is out of bounds. My wife and I went out on our first date on November 9th, 1993. We talked for hours at an 24 hour diner over coffee. We shared testimonies. We shared our hopes and dreams for the future. We had instant chemistry and connection. As we were driving home, I felt it necessary to clarify some things. I told Kristi we should date for six weeks and then re-evaluate to see how we were feeling. If we felt like things were going well, we'd get serious. If not, we'd part ways. To show you what kind of fool I was at the time, I actually said to her, "If we part ways, let's not try to be friends. I have enough friends." Can you imagine? Thankfully, Kristi was already learning to tune me out! Ha! One week later, I fell in love with her and the rest is history. So much for my grand plan!

As I mentioned above, all relationships need definition. All relationships need boundaries if they are to thrive. This includes our relationship with God. Listen again to how He defines things for Solomon. "I have heard your prayer and your plea, which you have made before me. I have consecrated this house that you have built, by putting my name there forever. My eyes and my heart will be there for all time. And as for you, if you will walk before me, as David your father walked, with integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you, and keeping my statutes and my rules, then I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised David your father, saying, 'You shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel.' But if you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land that I have given them, and the house that I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight, and Israel will become a proverb and a byword among all peoples. And this house will become a heap of ruins. Everyone passing by it will be astonished and will hiss, and they will say, 'Why has the Lord done thus to this land and to this house?' Then they will say, 'Because they abandoned the Lord their God who brought their fathers out of the land of Egypt and laid hold on other gods and worshiped them and served them. Therefore the Lord has brought all this disaster on them." (1 Kings 9:3-9) God leaves nothing to the imagination. He is very clear with Solomon. Walk faithfully and you will be blessed. Walk unfaithfully and you will be cursed. These are the conditions of the covenant God first made with his father, David. And tragically, Solomon fails to live up to them. The result is national division and civil war.

What about us? We live under the "new covenant" established in Christ's blood. The relationship we have with God is decidedly one-sided. He sets the conditions but He also bears the consequences. He too wants us to walk in faithfulness but He has chosen never to reject us even when we are unfaithful. Instead, He takes the punishment we deserve. He accepts the wages of our sin. Therefore, instead of "everyone passing by" being astonished at our ruin, they gaze upon the Crucified One in astonishment at His great love. Does this mean we get to live without boundaries? Does this mean we can ignore His expectations? Dismiss His commands? Absolutely not. There are natural consequences for sin that we must bear. There are natural repercussions for sin that ripple out to those around us. God will never break His promise to us. He will never abandon His covenant with His people. He will never walk out on the relationship but He will – in His steadfast lovingkindness and patience – bear with us when we suffer for our transgressions. Do not take God's love for granted. Do not presume upon His grace. Heed the warning He gives to King Solomon and commit your way to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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June 13, 2022

The Impact of Godly Leadership

Readings for today: Proverbs 27-29

I remember vividly staring at my ballot in 2020. I had done my research on each candidate. Studied each party platform. Read through all the ballot initiatives. And I found myself deeply conflicted. I remember thinking to myself, “This is the best we can do? 330 million people in the United States and this is the best we can come up with? Where are the godly leaders? Those who pursue righteousness and justice? Those who love mercy and walk in humility? Those who think not of themselves but have a heart to serve?” Perhaps it is my natural cynicism speaking but I get tired of picking the “lesser of two evils.” I get tired of electing leaders who I know will not be up to the task. I get tired of exercising my right to vote and then “groaning” for the next several years under the rule of the “wicked.” Please hear my heart. I am not asking for perfect leaders. There is no such thing this side of heaven. I am simply asking for leaders who have a heart for God. Leaders who reflect the character of God. Leaders who listen to God and seek His wisdom in the decisions they make. Sadly, they are few and far between.

Such has always been the case. Even in Israel. Why else do we see the same proverbs repeated over and over again in different forms? “An unjust man is an abomination to the righteous, but one whose way is straight is an abomination to the wicked.” (Proverbs 29:27) “When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan.” (Proverbs 29:2) “When the righteous triumph, there is great glory, but when the wicked rise, people hide themselves.” (Proverbs 28:12) Solomon understands the impact of righteousness on a nation. He understands Israel’s greatest need is godly leadership. Leaders who go hard after God are a community’s most precious resource. This is true at all levels of society. It starts in the home with godly parents. It extends into the local community with godly business leaders. Churches need godly pastors. All levels of government need godly politicians. (Just the fact that you probably think “godly politician” is an oxymoron is telling.) When our leaders are righteous, we rejoice in triumph and great glory. When our leaders are unrighteous, we groan and hide ourselves. This is simply the natural way of things.

So what do we do? First, we pray. We ask God to raise up godly leaders in the next generation to send to places like the White House, the United States Congress, the governor’s mansion and state courthouse, even our local town council. Second, we get to work. We raise up godly children and grandchildren. We make disciples who make disciples in the church. We get involved in our communities and hold our leaders accountable. We cling to righteousness ourselves even as we demand it from others. Finally, we vote. We get involved. We advocate for righteous public policy. We run for office. We flood the open government positions with godly men and women who will use their influence to chart a more righteous course. In short, we do all we can to make a difference for Jesus in our world.

Readings for tomorrow: Ecclesiastes 1-6

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June 14, 2022

Immortality

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 1-6

I recently had a conversation with one of my kids where they shared their desire to be remembered. We were walking off the USS Missouri having spent the last couple of hours reading through all the history associated with that particular ship. I think they were deeply impacted by all the stories they read and the life histories of some of the sailors who served and sacrificed and they found themselves drawn to something deeper. A desire for significance. A desire for something more out of this life than the pursuit of pleasure or wealth or fame or influence. It was an interesting conversation on a number of levels. This is a kid who has chased the vanity of pleasure. The vanity of wealth. The vanity of self-indulgence. This is a kid who has come to the end of those things pretty quickly, all things considered, and has discovered the truth of what Solomon shares with us today. “All is vanity and a striving after wind.” (Ecc. 1:14) It is cool to have a front row seat as they grow and mature and think deeply about the meaning of life.

The Book of Ecclesiastes is a challenging read. Solomon pulls no punches as he names the idols of our lives. The pursuit of wisdom and knowledge. The pursuit of self-indulgence and pleasure. The pursuit of living responsibly and hard work. The pursuit of wealth and honor. All these pursuits ultimately end in dust. A generation comes and a generation goes and the hard reality is that all of us are forgotten so quickly. How many of us actually know much about our great-grandparents? How many of us can even recall their names off the tops of our heads? What about our grandparents? How many of us know their stories? It’s sobering to think about how quickly and easily we forget. Surely Solomon is right. Only the earth remains forever. There is no remembrance of former things. There will be no remembrance of later things. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.

And yet, do we not all long to be remembered? Is there not something deep inside all of us that longs for such recognition? Not out of pride but simply out of desire to not be forgotten? Solomon is clear that God has set eternity in each person’s heart and I believe this longing is a reflection of that truth. When my child tells me they want to be remembered, they are tapping into a longing God has placed deep within them. It’s a good desire, even a godly one. And the glorious truth is when we fear God - which is where Solomon ultimately lands - and we live our lives for Him, all our works follow us. They endure throughout eternity. Though the memories of human beings are short, God’s memory is long. He will not forget what we have done. He will not forget what we have sacrificed. He will not forget what we have accomplished. I love how Revelation 14:13 puts it, “I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them.”

So back to my conversation with my kid. As we walked off the ship, we talked at length about the people we do remember and why we remember them. Typically, it’s because they’ve made a great sacrifice for a cause greater than themselves. The men and women who served over the years on the USS Missouri gave their lives for the cause of freedom. They fought against tyranny and injustice. The same is true for those who died on the USS Arizona which we visited later that day. The same is true for the martyrs I’ve met and prayed with in the Horn of Africa. Men and women who willingly give their lives to spread the gospel. And the same is true for me. It is highly unlikely I will be asked to become a martyr for my faith. At the same time, does not Christ command me to lay my life down daily for His sake? In this way, are not all Christians called to a life of sacrifice to a cause greater than ourselves? The cause of the Kingdom?

Readings for tomorrow: Ecclesiastes 7-12

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June 15, 2022

Perspective

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 7-12

It's never easy to feel under attack. Never easy to have your integrity questioned. Never easy to feel falsely accused or have your reputation trashed or your character assassinated. The last two years have been some of the hardest I've experienced in ministry. The amount of pressure on pastors and other ministry leaders has been enormous. And I know we are not alone. Teachers, healthcare workers, first responders, political leaders, basically anyone in the public eye has felt the stress of being caught in the cultural crossfire. COVID, ethnic tension, economic uncertainty, a brutal political season that never seems to end…the list goes on and on. As the pressure increased, families and friendships were torn apart. Tight-knit church families experienced splits. Formerly fruitful business relationships came to an end. People began buckling under the stress, left jobs they once loved, and started over. It's not been an easy road. If recent polls are correct, almost 40% of pastors have seriously considered leaving ministry altogether due to the pain of the past season. Thankfully, I do not count myself among them though I know many who do. It's heartbreaking.

Now just because I haven't considered leaving the ministry doesn't mean I haven't experienced pain. I've had my integrity questioned. Close friends broke off our relationship due to the choices I made during COVID. Families that I poured my heart and soul into left our church without a word. Brothers and sisters in Christ that I had prayed over, walked alongside during crises, married, baptized, you name it ghosted me and it hurt. In some cases, I heard through the grapevine some of the things they were saying about me in the community. Little of which was true. It didn't feel good. So what kept me from becoming completely discouraged? What kept me from joining the ranks of those who felt like they needed to pack it in? I think it's what Solomon shares here in Ecclesiastes.

"It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting…sorrow is better than laughter…the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth." (Ecc. 7:2-4) Perspective. This is what has saved me. God's perspective. Reframing my experience in light of the suffering I have experienced in my own life as well as the incredible suffering I have seen around the world. The reality is I have walked through the valley of the shadow of death. I know the way well. Almost fifteen years ago, the shadow of death fell over my marriage and family. The shadow of death fell over my career. My life was in a death spiral of my own making and when I finally hit rock bottom, I found Jesus waiting there for me. Perspective. Once or twice a year, I am blessed to go to Africa. I get to spend time with the persecuted church. I've personally met and gotten to know martyrs. The suffering these brothers and sisters endure for the sake of Christ is overwhelming. Still they find joy. Still they experience peace. Perspective. It's all about perspective.

Many years ago, someone shared a great quote with me from Charles Spurgeon. "If anyone thinks ill of you, do not despair. You are far worse then they could ever imagine!" ;-) I chuckle every time I think of it. It helps me hold onto perspective. The reality is life is in this world is hard. Jesus promised as much. In this world we will face trials. In this world we will undergo tribulation. The only thing that gives us hope in the face of all we have suffered is that Jesus has overcome the world.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 10-11, 2 Chronicles 9, Proverbs 30-31

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June 16, 2022

The Love of Money

Readings for today: 1 Kings 10-11, 2 Chronicles 9, Proverbs 30-31

“Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the Lord?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.” (Proverbs 30:8-9)

Today demonstrates why it is so good to read the Bible chronologically. Juxtaposing these verses from Proverbs over and against the reign of Solomon provides a striking image for us to reflect on. We tend to think of wealth as a blessing from God. We rejoice when our ship comes in. We are thankful to live in beautiful homes. Drive nice cars. Take nice vacations. Build plenty of wealth to retire on and enjoy the twilight years of life. What we fail to consider are the very real spiritual dangers that accompany such wealth. After all, Jesus wasn’t joking when He said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God.” (Mark 10:25)

Solomon was fabulously wealthy. During his reign, Israel enjoyed a period of great peace and prosperity. The economy was strong. Unemployment was down. Silver was so plentiful it ceased to hold any value. His annual income was astronomical. 666 talents of gold equals almost 40,000 pounds of gold each year. An ounce of gold on the current market is almost $1,300 dollars. $1300x16x40,000 = $832 million dollars per year! Incredible! No wonder he overlaid everything with gold! No wonder he sat on an ivory throne! But with all that wealth came temptation. The temptation to become self-sufficient. The temptation to become self-reliant. The temptation to forget God as the One from whom all blessings flow. And that’s exactly what happened. Solomon forgot God. Influenced by his foreign wives, he began building shrines to different gods. Trusting in his own strength, he failed to see the danger before it was too late. Unlike his father David, there is no indication in Scripture that Solomon ever repented of his sin. And though he finished his reign in relative peace, the nation would fracture after his son came to the throne.

“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.” (1 Timothy 6:10) It is often said that money itself is not evil but only the love of money. This is true. However, I am a sinner. My heart is naturally oriented away from God and toward myself. Because of my fallen condition, when you put a dollar in my hand, I tend to fall in love with it. I almost cannot help myself. The more I have, the more I want. It becomes an almost insatiable appetite.

Now consider where I live. Douglas County routinely ranks among the wealthiest counties in the country. The average household income is well above six figures. This places us in the top one percent of the world’s wealthiest people. In fact, if you want to find out where you land, head over to “How Rich Am I?” and plug in your income. It will ballpark you against the rest of the world and the results may surprise you. Hopefully, they will humble you because we always have tendency to compare ourselves with those who have more than us not less. And while there are great blessings that come with such wealth, as I said above, there is also great danger. Just like Solomon, we too have a tendency to forget God. We have a tendency to be self-reliant. Self-sufficient. Self-dependent. And this results in high rates of depression, anxiety, addiction, and suicidal ideation because we simply were not designed to bear the burdens of this life without God. So where then can we find hope? If it will be harder for us to get into God’s Kingdom than a camel through the eye of a needle, then what chance do we really have? Thankfully, with God all things are possible! Our only hope is to repent of our natural, selfish greed and turn back to Him. We must give sacrificially and generously of our wealth so that it loosens its grip on us. This is God’s antidote that saves us from falling in love with money.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 12, 2 Chronicles 10

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June 17, 2022

It's All About Me

Readings for today: 1 Kings 12, 2 Chronicles 10

We live in a narcissistic age. The focus is all on "me." It shapes the way we work. The way we live. The way we relate to others. Millions of dollars are being spent every year by advertisers and the media to convince us that "we" are the center of the universe. Our needs are what are most important. We deserve more. We are worth more. We are owed more. The messaging is endless. Relentless. Ubiquitous. It's impossible to escape. The impact is devastating and wide-ranging. Entitlement affects our families, neighborhoods, little leagues, schools, businesses, churches, politics, you name it. Entitlement is the source of the "culture of outrage" one experiences on cable news and social media. Entitlement creates and reinforces divisions in our country because the grand American experiment was founded on the principle of self-sacrifice. But to the entitled, sacrifice is a foreign concept. Serving others is anathema. Giving oneself away is not in the vocabulary.

Solomon is dead. The wisest and most powerful king Israel has ever known is no longer on the throne. It's Rehoboam's time. Will he unite the nation? Clearly the opportunity is there. "Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king." (1 Kings 12:1) All Israel showed up with the intent of making him king. This is his moment. All he has to do is reach out and capture it. The people even show him the way. Lighten our load a bit. Give us some rest. Your father worked us hard and we need a break. Do this and we will serve you. The wise counselors his father relied on for advice agree. "If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever." (1 Kings 12:7) Serve the people. Bless them. Honor them. Do right by them. If you will do this, they will serve you forever. But Rehoboam feels entitled. We don't know his inner thoughts but I imagine he desired to do even greater things than his father. He aspired to an even greater fame. Greater glory. He doesn't want to serve the people. They exist to serve him. This is the essence of the advice of his peers. Don't show weakness. Don't give an inch. Show them you're twice the man your father was. It is better to be feared than to be loved. "My little finger is thicker than my father's thighs. And now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions." (1 Kings 12:10-11) You owe me, Israel. I demand you serve me. I demand you submit to me. I demand you love me. The result? Outrage. Rebellion. Division. The fracturing of a once great nation.

Do you struggle with entitlement? When your child is benched at a game, do you automatically assume he or she has been unfairly treated? When they come home complaining about their teacher, do you automatically assume the teacher has it out for them? When you are passed over for the promotion at work, do you assume something nefarious about the decision? When you hear politicians from the other political party speak, do you assume the worst about their intentions? When you are disappointed at church, do you gossip and spread rumors? Such attitudes and actions betray a sinful sense of entitlement that needs to be confessed before the Lord.

Repentance in this area is critically important. Repentance replaces entitlement with a servant-heart. A heart that longs to serve others rather than be served. Husbands lay down your lives for your wives. Wives serve your husbands. Fathers, don't exasperate your children. Serve them as unto the Lord. Employers, don't treat your employees as commodities to be used but honor them as co-laborers in the work you are doing. Employees seek to serve your employers with a gracious heart and be thankful for the job they provide. Teachers, serve your students. Students, serve your teachers and understand they are there because they have your best in mind. Coaches, serve your players. Do everything you can to

further their athletic careers. Players trust your coaches. Put the good of the team above your own success. Politicians, work not for the good of your party but for the good of our nation. Church leaders, seek first the Kingdom of God and do all you can to help those God has entrusted to your care to grow in their relationship with Jesus.

Entitlement poisons everything it touches. A servant-heart blesses everything it touches. Where do you find yourself today?

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 13-14, 2 Chronicles 11-12

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June 18, 2022

True Worship

Readings for today: 1 Kings 13-14, 2 Chronicles 11-12

God cares about our worship. He expects, even demands, His people worship Him in Spirit and in Truth. He expects us to enter into worship focused solely on bringing honor and glory to Him alone. Worship that honors God is faithful to Scripture. Music that honors God has little to do with style and everything to do with the words being sung. Prayers that honor God are humble and contrite. Liturgy that honors God connects us with the saints who have gone before us and we join them even as they worship now around God's throne. Preaching that honors God comes straight from the Bible and has little use for human opinion. The way we shape our spaces and gatherings and experiences in worship is critical and must be focused on drawing us close to God and to each other. All of these things have been hallmarks of worship for God's people down through the ages going all the way back to ancient Israel. And while the ceremonial laws governing worship surely have changed - and even been fulfilled in Christ - it still doesn't release us from the responsibility of giving God the worship He deserves and demands. Anything less and we run the risk of engaging in what the Bible calls "abomination."

"Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim and lived there. And he went out from there and built Penuel. And Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah." So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, "You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. Then this thing became a sin, for the people went as far as Dan to be before one. He also made temples on high places and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the Levites. And Jeroboam appointed a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month like the feast that was in Judah, and he offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made. He went up to the altar that he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, in the month that he had devised from his own heart. And he instituted a feast for the people of Israel and went up to the altar to make offerings." (1 Kings 12:25-33)

Yesterday, we read about Rehoboam's folly as he refused to listen to wise counselors and instead took his advice from fools. The result was the dividing of a nation. God had ordained Jeroboam to take over the northern kingdom of Israel. Ten tribes were entrusted into his hands. God was with him. God had established him. God had raised him up to be king. But Jeroboam was scared. Afraid of what might happen if his people returned to Jerusalem for worship. He was afraid their hearts would return to the house of David and he would lose his kingdom. So makes a tragic mistake. Rather than trust God, he creates his own system of worship. Rather than give God the worship He deserves and demands, Jeroboam makes idols. Establishes his own priesthood. Built his own temples and high places. Established his own feasts. To be sure, these things paralleled the system laid out in Scripture. They had the same forms and functions. They seem to accomplish the same purpose which was the worship of Yahweh. But they were not the same and the consequence for falsely worshipping Yahweh is utter destruction. The northern kingdom of Israel will be wiped off the map. The people will be scattered, never to return. It's a painful reminder of how deeply God cares about His own glory. Worship is about Him, not about us.

This story serves as a sobering reminder of how dangerous it is to bring our personal preferences into worship. This is something that afflicts so many churches in America today. I can't tell you the number of conversations I've had over the years about the style of music, the shape of the liturgy, the personality of the preacher, the color of the carpet in the sanctuary, you name it. I can't tell you the number of preachers I know who uncritically adopt secular communication methods, employ gimmicks, or even seek to manipulate the worship experience in order to elicit a particular emotional response. Worship is not entertainment. It's not a TED talk. It's not a concert. It's not a spectator sport. It's not a religious "good" or "service" that we consume. Worship is about God. It's about coming before God and offering all that we are and all that we have back to Him. It's about gathering with God's people to offer praise and thanksgiving for what He has done. Worship happens under trees, in dark basements under threat of persecution, in soaring cathedrals, auditoriums filled with the latest and greatest technology, humble storefronts, living rooms, or simple sanctuaries all across the globe. Worship is accompanied with organ, guitars, drums, keys, and most of all, the human voice. It doesn't have to be on key. The amplification doesn't always have to work. The songs may be strange or unfamiliar. All that matters is that the music leads us to God. Worship is led by preachers and pastors and priests and laypeople who do their best to interpret God's Word. They may be young or old. Dynamic or dull. Humorous or boring. Energetic or lethargic. The main point is that they speak God's truth to God's people to the best of their limited ability. This is true worship and anything less runs the risk of falling under God's judgment.

So let me be a little bold. If you find yourself in worship thinking about how much you hate the music and refuse to sing...you are in sin. If you find yourself dis-engaged in worship as the gospel is being preached...you are in sin. If the primary reason you attend church is to be entertained or to be emotionally moved...you are in sin. If you jump from church to church without ever committing your gifts, talents, wealth, and abilities to a local church family...you are in sin. If you go to church to "be fed" rather than to give God the honor and praise He deserves...you are in sin. If you attend worship flippantly, casually, or only when it's convenient for your schedule...you are in sin. You must repent. You must ask God to forgive you and grant you a heart for true worship. Neglecting the worship of the Living God is serious, friends. Make sure your heart is right before God.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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June 20, 2022

Faith of our Fathers

Readings for today: 1 Kings 15:1-24, 2 Chronicles 13-16

Yesterday was Father's Day. A day we take time to celebrate our fathers and what they mean to us. For some it is a day of celebration. They've been blessed to have a great dad. Perhaps even a godly dad. A dad who poured his life into them. A dad who provided for them. A dad who served them. A dad who taught them about Jesus. For others, it's a painful day. They don't have a great dad. Their dad walked out on them. Their dad abused them. Their dad cursed them. Their dad certainly didn't teach them about the love of Jesus. For still others, it's a bittersweet day. They've lost their dad. They miss his wisdom and advice. They miss his hugs and affection. They miss his faithful presence. Fathers serve a special role in our lives. They have a high calling which is to do their best to reflect the character of their Heavenly Father to their children. So many kids form their view of God based on their relationship with their dad.

I thought about the power of fathers as I read our text for today. As we read deeper into the histories of God's people, you will begin to see patterns emerge. Some kings are faithful and accomplish great things for God. Some kings are faithless and fall under His judgment. All of them are a mixed bag to some extent, seeking God faithfully at times and falling short at other times. We've already seen this reflected in the life of David and Solomon and Rehoboam. Today we read about Abijah and Asa. Two men who followed their fathers' example. The judgment of the author of 1 Kings is that Abijah did not wholly walk with the Lord. He continued the pattern of sins that his father did and yet God remained faithful for the sake of His covenant with David. The author of the Chronicles is less harsh in judging Abijah. He acknowledges the way Abijah called on God in his war with Jeroboam. Still it seems clear that Abijah left a mixed legacy to his own son, Asa. Asa seems to fair better. He "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord" though he did not remain true all his days. He cleansed Judah of her idolatry. He set an example by giving generously to the Temple. He cried out to God when faced with overwhelming odds in his war with Zerah the Ethiopian. Perhaps most importantly, he led a covenant renewal ceremony for all of Judah. However, towards the end of his life, his courage failed and his faith in God faltered. When the king of Israel invaded, Asa sought help from Syria rather than from God. When confronted, he refused to repent and even became cruel. God's judgment fell. He contracted a wasting disease. His reign ended in conflict. His life serves as a sobering reminder to us all.

What kind of father did you have? Was he a godly man? Did he show you how to love Jesus? Did he teach you how to pray, how to read God's Word, how to worship and serve? Did he set an example for you to follow? Did he leave a spiritual legacy? If you are a father, what kind of dad are you? Are you godly? Are you showing your children how to love Jesus? Are you teaching them how to pray, how to read God's Word, how to worship and serve? Are you setting an example for them to follow? Are you planning on leaving a spiritual legacy? If you are not a father yet but long to be one, what plans are you making right now to make sure you will be the kind of godly father your children need you to be? How are you developing your character? How are you growing your relationship with Christ? How are you preparing for that day when your first child arrives and you're given both the opportunity and the responsibility to raise them in the Lord? By the way, these are great questions for mothers as well. They are worthy of reflection for anyone who is a parent, longs to be a parent, or who serves as a spiritual parent for the children in a local church family.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 15:25-34, 1 Kings 16, 2 Chronicles 17

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June 21, 2022

Spiritual Entropy

Readings for today: 1 Kings 15:25-34, 1 Kings 16, 2 Chronicles 17

Humanity is broken. Leave us on our own and we will choose sin over and over again. We just can't seem to help ourselves. I love how Proverbs 26:11 describes it, "Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly." Pretty visceral image, right? We see this pattern repeated throughout Scripture. From the opening pages of Genesis all the way to Revelation. God reaches out to humanity. Raises up a man or woman after His own heart. Noah. Abraham and Sarah. Moses. Joshua. Deborah. Hannah. Samuel. David. But with each passing generation, things go from bad to worse. Spiritual entropy on display. The faithfulness of those who've gone before us is lost as our lust for power and control and self-gratification takes over. Jeroboam abandoned the ways of David. Despite the fact that God Himself raised him up and gave him the northern kingdom, Jeroboam refused to worship God in the way He deserves and demands. He sets his kingdom on disastrous course. After he dies, chaos sets in. Constant conflict. Assassinations. Betrayal. Rebellion. And throughout we read this refrain, "He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord..."

What keeps us from experiencing a similar fate? Courageous faith. I love how the Bible describes King Jehoshaphat. 2 Chronicles 17:6, "His heart was courageous in the ways of the Lord." What does this mean? Jehoshaphat removed all the idols and shrines that kept getting built on the hills throughout Judah. He loved God and followed His commandments. He sent out his officials to the farthest reaches of his kingdom to bring God's Word to the people. Doesn't that sound like the Great Commission from Matthew 28? Rather than wait for the people to come to him, come to the Temple, come to Jerusalem to learn about the ways of God; Jehoshaphat is so passionate about God, he sends out evangelists! Incredible! And what does God do in return? He honors Jehoshaphat. He entrusts him with wealth and riches. He gives Jehoshaphat power and authority. His kingdom experiences a season of peace as the fear of the Lord falls on everyone around them.

Is your heart courageous in the ways of the Lord? Do you seek God daily for wisdom and guidance and strength? Do you love His Word? Hunger and thirst for time with Him? Do you love to worship? To gather with God's people to bring God praise? Do you seek to serve Him in all you do? Is your work an offering? Is your home a temple? Do you share the good news of the gospel with those around you who do not know the Lord? Do you pray for revival in our nation? Do you want to see God move powerfully in our town?

Now more than ever, we need men and women of faith whose hearts are courageous in the ways of the Lord! It's literally the only answer and the only hope we have! I've seen it in action. I've seen what happens when men and women dedicate their lives to God. They plant churches. They risk pain and suffering and persecution and death for the sake of the gospel. They give up all they have for the glory of Christ. If I've learned anything from my African brothers and sisters it is this...nothing can stop a man or woman whose heart is courageous in the ways of the Lord! Thousands of new churches. Hundreds of thousands of new believers. Entire communities and regions being transformed. There's simply nothing like it on earth!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 17-19

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June 22, 2022

Miracles

Readings for today: 1 Kings 17-19

For most of my life, when I've read the story of Elijah, I tend to focus on his confrontation with King Ahab or his showdown with the prophets of Baal or his flight from Jezebel or perhaps most of all, his encounter with God on the mountain. However, in recent years, I've spent more time focusing on the widow of Zarephath. Reading her story reminds me of so many of the women I've met in places like Uganda and Ethiopia and Rwanda. Windows who spend their days gathering sticks into large bundles and carrying them on their backs to market. Day in and day out they do this work. Week after week. Month after month. Year after year until their bodies give out. They trade their labor for food or for a little cash. They barely make enough to eat much less save. They never take a day off. They never take a vacation. This is the kind of woman Elijah meets when he arrives in Zarephath. She takes time out from her back-breaking labor to bring him a drink. She willingly sacrifices her last bit of flour and oil - what was going to be her final meal with her son before they died - and gives it to Elijah to eat. Despite her suffering, she never wavers in showing hospitality to this man of God. It's awe-inspiring.

As I said, I've met this widow many times before. I've spent time in her home. I've shared a meal with her. I've watched her prepare what little she has to entertain strangers from afar. I've been touched by her gracious hospitality. Despite the fact that she's worked all day. Made two or three long trips to the local watering hole. Finished her chores. Fed her children and put them to bed. She still finds time to serve. She still finds time to love. I am convinced this is why God answers her prayers. I am convinced this is why God works miracles on her behalf. She has a simple, yet profound faith. She doesn't complain. Doesn't question. Doesn't cop a bad attitude. She is faithful. She is obedient. She trusts the Lord and she is blessed.

How I wish I could be like the widow! How I wish I could live with such simple faith! She has become my teacher in so many ways. She has taught me how to pray. She has taught me how to worship. She has taught me how to sing. She has taught me how to dance. She has taught me how to serve and love and sacrifice for Jesus. When I follow her example, I find my eyes being lifted above the hills. My gaze fixes on Jesus as I realize I am in the presence of one of His very special, beloved children. The widows I've met are like "advance scouts" for the Kingdom of God. They are much further along in the journey than I am and Jesus is faithful to send them back to encourage me along the way. They are not just bit players in some other person's story…even if that person is Elijah himself! They are numbered among God's greatest saints in glory!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 20-21

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June 23, 2022

No Fear

Readings for today: 1 Kings 20-21

I find myself sitting in denominational meetings this week. I love these people. I love their heart for the gospel. I love their desire to serve God and His Kingdom. They are my friends, my tribe, my family. But I know many of them are hurting. Many of them have come out of the last two years wounded and broken and discouraged. Their churches are rife with conflict and division. They've felt each loss personally. In addition, they know the world is changing rapidly. There are forces on the move that are hostile to the church. Those forces can seem overwhelming at times. Many are wondering how much longer they can hold out. Many churches are wrestling over their future. We are living through very challenging times.

Of course, none of this is new to God. Consider the challenge Israel was facing during the reign of King Ahab. The king of Syria had gathered a coalition of thirty-two kings. His army numbered in the thousands and included many horses and chariots. He had sent word ahead that he was coming for all Ahab held dear. All his wealth. All his power. His wives and children. Nothing would be held back. Nothing left out. Ben-hadad would have it all or Ahab and Israel would be destroyed. Wiped off the face of the earth. What Ben-hadad failed to consider was God. Israel's power was never dependent on the might of her armies. Her wealth could never be measured in just silver and gold. Her influence had nothing to do with the alliances she made with the kingdoms around her. She was beloved by God. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else. He was her Protector. He was her Provider. He was her Stronghold and Shelter.

It's so easy to give into anxiety. So easy to give into fear. It's so easy to focus on the winds that swirl around us. Focus on the waves crashing over us. Take our eyes off Jesus and begin to sink under the weight of it all. But the same God who exercised His sovereignty over the hills and valleys in Israel is still at work in the world today. No matter what principalities and powers may rise. No matter what spiritual forces of evil take the field. No matter how hostile the cultural forces of our world may become, God will have the victory. All we have to do is cry out to Him. Throw ourselves on His mercy and grace. Depend on Him for all we say and do. So let's not get distracted. Let's not let fear win the day. Let's stay on mission. Focus on expanding God's Kingdom. Let's walk in confidence in the victory Christ has already won for us on the Cross!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 22, 2 Chronicles 18-20

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June 24, 2022

Singing our Faith

Readings for today: 1 Kings 22, 2 Chronicles 18-20

Jehoshaphat is one of my favorite kings. He's not perfect. He makes mistakes along the way. He makes alliances with the wrong kind of people. And yet, his heart is for the Lord. "Jehoshaphat lived at Jerusalem. And he went out again among the people, from Beersheba to the hill country of Ephraim, and brought them back to the Lord, the God of their fathers." (2 Chronicles 19:4) I cannot imagine the daily pressures a king faces. Pressures to make decisions. Pressures to provide for his people. Pressures to defend against his enemies. Pressures all around and yet Jehoshaphat made it a priority to go out among his people and bring them back to the Lord. He obeyed the Great Commission long before Jesus spoke those words. He taught his people to obey all the Lord had commanded. He believed one of the defining priorities of his kingship was the ability to make disciples. To foster an environment in his nation where his people would grow spiritually. It's truly stunning when you take a step back to think about it.

Now some might ask what purpose did it serve? Some might question if this is really the king's job? Shouldn't he be attending to affairs of state? But then we run across a story in our reading today where God's people had to put their faith into action and all the hard work Jehoshaphat had put in bore fruit. Once again, God's people had come under threat. Another enemy rose up and came against them. They are outnumbered. They are outmatched. They are outgunned. But rather than despair, Jehoshaphat turns his heart to the Lord. He calls on the Lord to be faithful to His promises. He walks by faith, trusting God to deliver him. And his people - having been taught the faith by Jehoshaphat himself and seen his example firsthand - follow him. Listen to what Jehoshaphat says and does, "Hear me, Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the Lord your God, and you will be established; believe his prophets, and you will succeed." And when he had taken counsel with the people, he appointed those who were to sing to the Lord and praise him in holy attire, as they went before the army, and say, "Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever." And when they began to sing and praise, the Lord set an ambush against the men of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah, so that they were routed." (2 Chronicles 20:20-22)

Imagine trusting God so much that you can literally face death with a tune on your lips! Imagine believing God so much that you can walk into battle with a song in your heart! Imagine facing whatever overwhelming odds you may face in your life with joy because you know…YOU KNOW… the Lord is good and His steadfast love endures forever! It can happen, friends! I've seen it and experienced it myself! Just over a month ago, I was in eastern Ethiopia training church planters. 48 of them were being sent north into a region where a civil war has been raging. Everything has been burned to the ground in that area. There is famine and hardship and incredible suffering. There has been violence and war crimes and the ceasefire is fragile at best. The challenges these men and women face are overwhelming. All of them will face persecution. Some of them will lose their lives. But as we finished commissioning them, they left the platform singing! Singing! They believe God has gone before them. They believe God will be with them. They believe He will have the victory no matter what happens to them. It was simply incredible.

How does one get to such a place in their faith? By worshipping God. Spending time with Him regularly and frequently. Never neglecting the gathering of God's people. Seeking to serve God in all you say and do throughout the week. Keeping God's will and God's glory as the overarching priority of your life not because you are trying to earn anything or have something to prove but simply because

you love God and you want to live for Him. Will you do this perfectly? No. Neither did Jehoshaphat. But God's not asking for perfection. He's asking for your heart. Give Him your heart today.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 1-4

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June 25, 2022

Miracles: What's God's Point?

Readings for today: 2 Kings 1-4

So here's a question…why does God perform miracles? What's the point of signs and wonders? Why do they seemingly happen in some places but not others? Why do they appear so random? In our reading today, both Elijah and Elisha perform miracle after miracle. Future telling. Pools of water suddenly appearing in the desert. Water purification. Incredible military victories. Vessels overflowing with oil. Resurrection. Driving out poison with flour. Multiplying bread to feed a hundred men. To the skeptical, stories like these make the Bible seem primitive and superstitious. To the doubter, stories like these can be confusing and frustrating as they wrestle with why they don't seem to happen much anymore. To the faithful, stories like these encourage belief and deeper trust in God. However, the question still remains...why does God perform miracles? Why does God break through the time/space continuum? Why does He suspend the laws of nature and the universe? Why does He intervene in certain situations but not others? Reach down and touch certain lives and not others? These are important questions that must be faced and thankfully, the Bible provides a clear answer.

First and foremost, miracles are given for the purpose of pointing God's people to faith. They are not ends in and of themselves. They are signposts. Pointing beyond themselves. They are given to direct our attention heavenward to the Lord of all creation. The Author of all life. They are stark reminders that we are not at the mercy of our circumstances. This world and all the natural laws that govern it - from gravity to thermodynamics to photosynthesis - is not all there is. There is a God who stands above and beyond such laws, who is able to set them aside for reasons He Himself only knows and understands.

Secondly, miracles are given so that God's people might always cling to hope. Even when circumstances seem their most dire. When evil seems to be on the march. Injustice and oppression winning the day. Persecution at its fiercest. Rage and violence burning white hot. Disease ravages the body. Famine and poverty threaten our well-being. Even in the darkest of times, we still have hope. Hope in a God who can and does intervene. Hope in a God who draws near the broken-hearted and crushed in spirit. Hope in a God who fights on behalf of the poor and oppressed and outcast and stranger.

Third, miracles are given to remind us how limited and finite we are as creatures. Power. Wealth. Influence. Control. We like to live with the illusion that we are the masters of our own destines. The captain of our fates. We like to think we are in charge. We like to act like we've got everything under control. But miracles remind us who truly holds the power. Miracles remind us of our relative insignificance in the grand scheme of things. Miracles bring us face to face with the power of God and, like Job, we shut our mouths and fall on our faces before Him.

Ultimately, miracles force us to look beyond ourselves. Beyond our needs. Beyond our circumstances. Beyond our wisdom. Beyond our strength. Miracles force us to trust in God. To trust in His purposes and His design. We cannot bend God to our will. There is no magic formula to get God to do our bidding. Miracles happen on His time and in accordance with His will. Our job is to believe. To have faith. To place our lives in His hands and trust Him for the outcome.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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June 27, 2022

One Person's Impact

Readings for today: 2 Kings 5-8:15

I have heard it said that the world has yet to see the power that would be unleashed through one man or woman who's sold out to God. I disagree. I think we see such power all the time. Certainly in Scripture. Take the story of Elisha for instance. He's like a one-man wrecking crew when it comes to Syria. Ben-hadad wanted to destroy Israel. Invaded time after time. He had the best generals. Mighty men of valor like Naaman. The odds were surely in his favor. But Israel had one advantage...Elisha. A man who loved God with all his heart. From Elisha's deep faith sprung wisdom and insight and even prophetic utterances. He thwarted the plans of Ben-hadad to such an extent that his counselors believed it was like Elisha was hanging out in Ben-hadad's bedroom!

Elisha posed such a great threat that Ben-hadad sent his entire army on a seek and destroy mission. Find him. Kill him. Destroy whatever city is giving him refuge. So Elisha and his servant wake up one morning only to see the Syrian army arrayed in all its might before them. It must have been an intimidating sight. The servant is immediately afraid. What will we do? How will we survive? But Elisha doesn't miss a beat. He asks God to open the eyes of his servant so that he can see what Elisha sees. Horses. Chariots. The mountains ringed with fire from the army of the Lord.

This is one of my favorite stories in all of Scripture because of the reminder that though my circumstances may seem bleak. Though I may undergo all kinds of trials and tribulations. Though I may suffer and struggle and hurt. Though the enemy wage war against me. Though the government or culture or society grow increasingly hostile to the gospel. No matter what may come, my adversaries - as numerous as they may be - are no match for the armies of the Lord! His sovereign hand continues to lead and guide and protect. His power cannot be measured. His wisdom cannot be fathomed. And if I will simply lift my eyes above the hills, I will see where my true help comes! (Psalm 121)

"Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all." (Ecclesiastes 9:11) I frequently find myself in positions where I am weak. I have no power. No authority. I am not strong or swift or wise or wealthy. In those moments, I am tempted to despair. And that's when God has me right where He wants me! God does His best work when I come to the end of myself. God does His greatest work when I get out of the way. God is at His most glorious when I am weak and afraid and lonely and have nowhere else to turn. All I have to do is open my eyes. See the power He has brought to bear. Sit back and watch Him go to work. Trust Him for the victory.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 8:16-29, 2 Chronicles 21:1-22:9

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June 28, 2022

Generational Sin

Readings for today: 2 Kings 8:16-29, 2 Chronicles 21:1-22:9

In yesterday's devotional, I focused on the impact a single righteous person can make in this world. Sadly, the reverse is also true. Ahab was a terrible king for all kinds of reasons. He broke just about every one of the Ten Commandments. He chose to worship Baal rather than Yahweh. He made graven images. He took the Lord's name in vain. He lied. He coveted. He murdered. He stole. He treated sin flippantly and "did more to arouse the anger of the Lord" than any of the kings who came before him. His wife Jezebel was at least his equal in unrighteousness. She partnered with him in all of his crimes. She sought the death of Elijah, Israel's greatest prophet. Together, they did more to lead Israel astray than any other king in her history.

It shouldn't come as a surprise to us when their influence exerts itself generationally over their descendants. Jehoram, king of Judah, came under their sway by marrying their daughter. As such, he chose to walk away from his own father's example of faithfulness and instead "walk in the ways of the kings of Israel." The results are predictable. The same things that happen to Israel begin to happen in Judah. War breaks out on their borders. Tribes like Edom successfully revolt and set up kingdoms of their own. Pagan shrines known as "high places" are re-established throughout the hill country. God's people begin to worship other gods. After Jehoram (or Joram) dies, his son Ahaziah follows his ungodly legacy. He even makes a strategic alliance with the house of Ahab against Syria but it ends in great tragedy. The house of Ahaziah comes to an end. Jehoram, Ahaziah's father, dies "to no one's regret."

It's a sobering reminder to us all. Generational sin is real. The sins of the fathers and mothers are often passed down to the children. Sin that goes unaddressed in our lives is often repeated by those who follow us. We exert a shaping influence for good or for evil on those around us, especially those in our own homes. How often have I seen my own weaknesses and struggles reflected in my children? How often have I seen my doubts and fears reproduced in the people I serve? How often have my own sinful tendencies come back to haunt me? Thankfully, God is faithful. As I humble myself and repent before Him, He is faithful to forgive and He is faithful to make my life a living demonstration of the gospel. Through my brokenness, His surpassing grace and power makes itself known and this too ripples out across the generations. So it comes down to this…what kind of legacy do I want to pass on? And what I am doing today to build that legacy?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 9-11, 2 Chronicles 22:10-23:21

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June 29, 2022

Justice and Righteousness

Readings for today: 2 Kings 9-11, 2 Chronicles 22:10-23:21

The story of Jehu is a terrifying one. Jehu is called to be God's hand of justice. He executes God's vengeance in a brutal, terrifying manner that was par for the course in the ancient near east. He assassinates two kings. He orchestrates the mass murder of their children. He systematically destroys the entire house of Ahab and Jezebel. And he eradicates the worshippers of Baal. It's a stark reminder of how seriously God takes sin. He simply will not allow evil to flourish. He will not allow injustice to stand. He will not allow humanity's godlessness to have the final word. Yes, He is patient with us. Yes, He gives us every opportunity to repent. But eventually there comes a day of reckoning. A day of judgment. A day when every wrong is set right and every injustice answered for. This is what we see on display in today's reading and it is simply a repetition of a pattern that's been in place since the Fall. Cain and Abel. The state of the world just before the Flood. The Tower of Babel. The time of the Judges. Left to her own devices, humanity inevitably descends into violence, suffering, and pain. She chooses her own ways rather than God's ways. She always wants to do what is right in her own eyes. Thankfully, God is faithful. He refuses to let us go. He refuses to cut us off forever. The rise of Joash strikes a hopeful note. God always preserves a remnant for Himself. A faithful people who follow His will and provide hope for the nation. Joash lived most of his life in faithfulness and the result is peace and prosperity and security. He restored the Temple. He cleansed the land of idolatry. He led the people back to true worship of the Living God.

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. We see this dynamic played out over and over again throughout the Scriptures. I love what it says in 2 Kings 13:23, "But the Lord was gracious to them and had compassion on them, and he turned toward them, because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them, nor has he cast them from his presence until now." No matter how far humanity falls. No matter how bad things may get. No matter how much violence and suffering and pain may be taking place. God is faithful. God is true. God is steadfast. Immovable. He will not abandon us. He will not forsake His people. He loves us with an everlasting love. "For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning." (Psalms 30:5)

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 12-13, 2 Chronicles 24

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June 30, 2022

Covenantal Faithfulness

Readings for today: 2 Kings 12-13, 2 Chronicles 24

God always keeps His promises. He made a promise to Noah never again to destroy the world by a flood. He made a promise to Abraham to make him the father of many nations. He made a promise to Isaac and to Jacob to bring forth from them a people He would call His very own. He made a promise to Moses to use him to deliver God's people from slavery. He made a promise to Joshua to go before him into the Promised Land. He made a promise to David to always have a descendant to sit on Israel's throne. In the ancient near east, such promises were sealed by a covenant. An agreement between two parties outlining their responsibilities. If one party breaks the covenant, the other party is not only freed from it's obligations but takes revenge. Not so with God. Though His people abandon the covenant over and over again. Though they refuse to obey it's conditions and live by it's terms. God remains faithful. He never lets Himself off the hook.

"But the Lord was gracious to them and had compassion on them, and he turned toward them, because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them, nor has he cast them from his presence until now." (2 Kings 13:23) These are stirring words especially for the Christian. We know God is so committed to keeping His promises that He sent His only Son to fulfill not only His obligations to us but our obligations to Him! Jesus took our place. He became the faithful "covenant-keeper" on our behalf. He paid the price we owed. He died the death we deserved. He endured the full fury of God's righteous wrath at human sin, turning it aside through His atoning death on the cross. This is how committed God is to us! He will never leave us or forsake us or abandon us or grow impatient with us or cut us off. His grace is eternal. His love never-ending. His mercies new every morning. His faithfulness is greater than we can ever know.

So what about us? How can we show this same faithfulness not only to God but to one another? How can we extend this same grace to each other? This same love to each other? How can we be merciful to one another as Christ was merciful towards us? There are so many divisions in our world. So many divisions in our churches. So many divisions in our families. We sin against each other. We disappoint each other. We let each other down constantly. And yet the call to covenantal faithfulness remains. To walk with each other through the dark valleys where life often takes us. To love each other even during those times when we are unlovable. To extend grace upon grace towards each other when we inevitably fail. Only God can can give us the strength to do this and the good news is He promises to just that for all those who would seek Him. All you have to do is ask. Make sure to ask God to give you what you need so you can serve those you love today!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 14-15, 2 Chronicles 25-27

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July 1, 2022

The Danger of Idolatry

Readings for today: 2 Kings 14-15, 2 Chronicles 25-27

High places. We see them pop up all over the place in the Kings and Chronicles. Often the righteousness of kings is judged on whether or not they tolerate them. What are they? Originally, they were sacred spaces where the Canaanite tribes worshipped their gods. If you flip back to Deuteronomy 12, you read these words, "You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place." (Deut. 12:2-3) Yahweh had set His people apart. They would be different. They would not be like any other tribe or nation. Because they were a nation of priests, they would worship Yahweh in the way He prescribed. "But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. And there you shall eat before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the Lord your God has blessed you." (Deut. 12:5-7)

Where was this place? Originally, it was the Tabernacle that traveled with them in the wilderness. After Solomon, it was the Temple in Jerusalem. This was the place where God had set His name and indwelt with His presence. This was the "place" the Israelites were commanded to seek when they worshipped. However, the travel could be difficult. The cost was high. It meant time away from the fields. Time away from home. After the kingdoms split, it meant possible defection by the northern tribes so the Israelite kings set up their own shrines (the sin of Jeroboam) and forbid their people from traveling to Jerusalem at the prescribed times. The people set up their own shrines to Yahweh on the very high places He once commanded them to destroy. If we assume the best of them, they were trying to worship Yahweh. Trying to remain faithful. Just not in the way He demanded or the way He deserved. At their worst, they adopted the worship practices of the locals and sought other gods.

God cares about our worship. He cares about what happens week in and week out in local churches all over the world. Not because God is taking attendance but because God seeks worshippers who will worship Him in Spirit and in Truth. Worshippers who will give Him the worship He demands in the way He deserves. Worshippers who will not compromise. Worshippers who will honor Him as holy. Worshippers who refuse to make themselves the center of the experience. Worshippers who lay aside their wants, their needs, their desires, their preferences to come before the Lord in humility. To do anything else is to create a "high place." A shrine to another god. And most of that time, that "god" is Self. The besetting sin of the Western Church is the idolatry of self. We are the object of our worship. Our satisfaction is the key performance indicator. We engage worship based on our own personal preferences. We refuse to honor God as holy. God as supreme. God as Lord. We are proud. We are arrogant. We think far too much of ourselves. And if the lives of the kings teach us anything it is this...God will not be mocked. We will be judged on the basis of who or what we worship.

Where are the high places in your life? Do you find yourself despising the gathering of God's people? Do you find yourself avoiding weekly worship? Do you find yourself struggling to hear the Word? Sing the songs? Pray the prayers? Let me gently but boldly call you to repentance, friends! Remember

whose presence you are in! Remember who you've come to serve! Remember what worship is all about! Repent. Confess. And ask the Spirit to renew your passion for true worship.

Readings for tomorrow: Jonah 1-4

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July 2, 2022

Love your Enemies

Readings for today: Jonah 1-4

Jonah is a great book. Especially when we read chonologically. We just finished reading about the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians and now we read of God's prophetic attempt to call those same Assyrians to repentance. Jonah is an unwilling prophet to say the least. He must have had a tremendously frustrating career. His own people refuse to follow the Lord. They keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again. They are unfaithful. They are unworthy. They are idolatrous. They are evil. 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 His 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 great book to read today. 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 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 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 is what should set believers apart from the rest of the world.

Unfortunately, believers 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 believer 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? Should God not pity rich as well as poor? Privileged as well as under-privileged? The list is infinite but thankfully so is God's grace.

Who are you at war with in your life today? Who engenders hatred in your heart? What enemies is God calling you to reach? Will you go? Or will you run?

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July 4, 2022

Loving our Nation

Readings for today: Amos 1-5

"I love America more than any other country in this world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually." - James Baldwin

I immediately thought of this quote as I read through the first few chapters of Amos this morning. James Baldwin was a civil rights writer and activist. He mainly gave voice to the oppressed through his brilliant novels and plays. Whereas some might call Martin Luther King Jr. the movement's prophet, Baldwin was her poet. He described in often deeply personal terms the impact of injustice on his people. Though he lived abroad for a good portion of his life, he loved America enough to call her to live up to her high ideals and traveled extensively through the Deep South giving lectures and advocating alongside other civil rights leaders.

As we dive into the prophetic literature of the Bible, it is tempting to assume these men hated their nation. Their words are often harsh and judgmental. They offer little in the way of hope. They pull no punches and lay out the dire consequences should Israel or Judah refuse to repent. And yet, I've come to believe these prophets loved their people just as Baldwin loved America. They longed to see their people return to the Lord with all their hearts. Long to see their nation rise up and live according to the commandments of God. They longed for Israel and Judah to be a light to the nations, set apart as God's chosen people on earth.

Amos was a simple shepherd when he first received God's call. He lived at a time when both ISrael and Judah seemed to be experiencing great prosperity and success. You might remember Uzziah enjoying great success as he expanded Judah's borders, rebuilt cities, and amassed much wealth. Similarly, Jeroboam II also enjoyed great success, expanding Israel's borders to her "former limits", conquering Damascus, defeating the Arameans, and amassing great wealth through trade. Indeed, most biblical scholars would argue that Israel and Judah reached the zenith of their power and wealth during the reigns of these two kings. Tragically, however, the seeds of destruction for both nations were already sown. They rejected the law of the Lord. (Amos 2:4) They sold the righteous for silver. (Amos 2:6) They trampled the heads of the poor and did not care for the afflicted. They engaged in sexual immorality and profaned God's holy name. (Amos 2:7-8) These actions brought them under God's judgment and He sent Amos to warn them with the hope that they might repent and return to Him.

What would such a return look like? Seeking the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. Honoring Him by obeying His commands. Confessing their sin. Repenting of the way they treated the poor and powerless in their midst. Caring for those in need. Always seeking good rather than evil. Letting justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. This is what it means to return to the Lord and it remains God's call to the nations of the earth to this day. America will only be great insofar as she seeks the Lord. Insofar as she clings to justice and righteousness and compassion and mercy. America will be judged, like all the nations of the earth, on how she cares for the poor, the afflicted, and the oppressed. She will be judged on how faithfully she follows God's commands and lives up to the ideals embedded in her founding documents. Ideals birthed out of deep reflection on Scripture and the nature of God. May we take time this 4th of July to not only celebrate the birth of our nation but pray for her as well. May we rededicate ourselves to the task of "forming a more perfect union" in alignment with God's will and God's ways.

Readings for tomorrow: Amos 6-9

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July 5, 2022

Self-Reflection

Readings for today: Amos 6-9

One of the temptations when reading the prophets is to assume God is talking about someone else. Assume God is talking about kings and princes and nations rather than ordinary people like me. And yet, as I read the opening lines from Amos 6, I feel a deep conviction settle in my own heart. Am I not at ease here in Parker? Do I not feel secure here in suburban America? I live in one of the wealthiest communities on the face of the planet. I live in one of the fastest growing areas in the country. Colorado is one of the most gorgeous states in our nation. Great weather. Majestic mountains. Active lifestyle. Lots of opportunity for work. Good schools for the kids. Great place to raise a family. It's tempting in such a place to become self-absorbed. To shut out the rest of the world and focus on myself. To retreat into a bubble and never emerge.

Amos confronts our complacency. He calls us to engage those outside our comfort zone. He calls us to pay particular attention to the poor and needy in our midst. Those who are less fortunate. Those who don't have access and opportunity to the blessings we've received. He calls us to radical generosity and a commitment to justice and righteousness. He calls us faithfulness and obedience to the Lord. If we do these things, we shall live long in the land God has provided. If we fail in these things, we will fall under His judgment.

Amos doesn't just talk the talk, he walks the walk. He makes a huge sacrifice by leaving his own comfort zone. He leaves all that's familiar behind - including his home and family and livelihood - to travel north to Israel. He stands in the gap for God's people when God begins to reveal visions and dreams of judgment. He prays for God to relent lest He utterly destroy His people and God answers His prayers. He is falsely accused of sedition and treason. And despite everything he endures, he ends his prophecy with words of hope. There will come a day when God will restore His people. He will repair their breaches and raise up their ruins. He will bless them with abundance and they will enjoy His favor again.

If you are like me, you long for those latter days. You long for the days when God restores the years the locusts have eaten. You long for the days when "mountains shall drip sweet wine and all the hills shall flow with it." You long for the days when all that was lost is regained. All that was ruined is rebuilt. All that was uprooted shall be planted and harvested. You long for the days when we can dwell secure once more not in our own strength which is fleeting but in the favor of the Lord which is forever. There's only one way to get from here to there and that is faithful obedience to the Lord's commands. Loving God with all our heart. Loving our neighbor as ourself. These are the first and second great commandments. They are the foundation on which we rebuild our lives.

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 1-5

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July 6, 2022

God's Great Faithfulness

Readings for today: Hosea 1-5

As a pastor, I have spent countless hours in marriage counseling. More often than not, they are in my office because one or both have been unfaithful. They have stepped out on their spouse with a friend. 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 at ever high rates 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!

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July 7, 2022

True Repentance

Readings for today: Hosea 6-9

I often get asked what it means to truly repent. Is it feeling bad about what you've done? Is it feeling guilty for being caught? Does it involve shame for being exposed? How do we repent? Is saying sorry enough? Does it involve asking for forgiveness? What about reconciliation? These are all really good questions and thankfully the Bible has answers. Consider Hosea 6:1-6…

"Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know; let us press on to know the Lord; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth." What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away. Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light. For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." (Hosea 6:1-6)

Repentance begins with humility. An honest, transparent acknowledgment of what we have done. No excuses. No blame-shifting. Just a confession that God is right and we are wrong. God is righteous in His judgment and we earned the punishment we received. God has torn us. God has struck us down. Our love was transient. It faded like a morning cloud or like the dew on the grass. God was faithful. He sent us prophets. He warned us by their words. But we did not listen. We refused to change our ways. Therefore His judgment fell on us and we are broken.

Repentance involves change. "Let us return to the Lord…" There phrase is pregnant with meaning. It signals a shift in attitude and action. A 180 degree turn on the path we were going down. A radical change in direction. Whereas we once were headed down the road to destruction, we are now traveling the narrow way that leads to life. What does this look like in real life? It looks like steadfast, faithful, sacrificial, authentic love instead of empty, nominal, "just going through the motions" worship. It involves a relentless pursuit of God and a longing for a deeper relationship with Him over simply satisfying the letter of the Law.

Repentance clings to hope. God is faithful. If we seek Him with all our heart, He promises to heal. He promises to bind up our wounds. He promises to revive us and raise us up. We can count on Him because we know His "going out is as sure as the dawn." His love as dependable as the spring showers that water the earth. There will come a day when God will restore the fortunes of His people.

What was true for Hosea and his family and the people of Israel remains true for us today. If we truly repent of our sin and come humbly before our God, He will restore our fortunes as well.

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July 8, 2022

The Tenderness of God

Readings for today: Hosea 10-14

Hosea includes some of the most tender imagery in the Bible. I love how he describes God's love for His people. It is deep. Profound. The love of a Father for his children. I identify with this language as a father myself. I know how this love feels. I feel it in my gut when I think about my own children. I remember holding each of them when they were born. I remember the feel of their soft skin and the wonder of their sweet cries. I remember when they took their first steps and said their first words. I remember when they began to smile and laugh. Though my children are now adults or approaching adulthood, these tender feelings of love remain. My heart swells with pride when I think of them and all they have accomplished over their short lives. Are they perfect? No. Have we had our battles over the years? Of course. Has any of that diminished my great love for them? Not a chance. The same is true for our God. Listen again to these words. Let them wash over you. Let them remind you of just how much you are loved and cherished by your Heavenly Father.

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son…Yet 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…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." (Hosea 11:1, 3-4, 8-9)

I don't know who may need to hear this today but God is for you not against you. God loves you, He does not hate you. When God looks at you, He has a smile on His face and a twinkle in His eye. His heart fills with joy every time He thinks of you. He is with you every minute of every day. He will never, ever leave your side. This is His promise and though you may experience what feels like His anger for a moment, His favor is for a lifetime. How do I know these things are true? He says as much in His Word, "I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily; he shall take root like the trees of Lebanon; his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon. They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow; they shall flourish like the grain; they shall blossom like the vine; their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon." (Hosea 14:4-7)

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 1-4

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July 9, 2022

A Political Faith

Readings for today: Isaiah 1-4

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

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

Isaiah presumably witnesses all of this. He sees it all go past. He lives it. His prophetic career begins at some point during the glory days under King Uzziah and ends at some point during the reign of King Hezekiah. Through it all, he watches his nation shift its allegiance from Yahweh to other gods. He watches his nation descend into cultural chaos as they abandon true worship and true righteousness. He watches the leaders of his nation attempt to reform and revitalize the country. He sees the ups and downs of their efforts. The successes and failures. He sees it all and then offers this Word from the Lord. It is honest. Real. Raw. No holds barred. He confronts. He speaks the truth. He calls out his own people. “Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.” (Isaiah 1:4) “Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!” (Isaiah 1:10) “For Jerusalem has stumbled, and Judah has fallen, because their speech and their deeds are against the Lord, defying his glorious presence.” (Isaiah 3:8)

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

over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory there will be a canopy. There will be a booth for shade by day from the heat, and for a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain." (Isaiah 4:2-6)

Once can easily recognize the parallels to our own time. How many of us lament the state of our nation? How many of us lament the moral drift of our culture? How many of us lament the pain and suffering and sin and degredation we see all around us? We lament the encroaching secularism that threatens to push our faith to the margins. And yet, are we willing to confront the deeper questions Isaiah poses? Why doesn't prayer for our nation fill our homes? Why are so many of our churches struggling with sin? Why do so many of our pastors and priests fall? How have we marginalized our own faith by refusing to share Christ with our neighbors, friends, and co-workers? By not speaking out for justice and righteousness and truth? By not walking in a spirit of love and grace and mercy and humility? Are we not as guilty as the people Isaiah was speaking to? And are we willing to hear his words as the Word of the Lord to us? Are we willing to repent and re-commit ourselves to God's ways?

Readings for tomorrow: None

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July 11, 2022

Promised Land

Readings for today: Isaiah 5-8

I flew into Tel Aviv on Sunday morning at 10AM. As we descended through the clouds in our 787, I eagerly leaned over my sleeping wife to catch my first glimpse of Israel. She goes by many names. The Promised Land to the ancient Israelites. The Holy Land to many Jews, Christians, and Muslims around the world today. Israel to her Jewish citizens. Palestine to the Arabs. The "vineyard of the Lord" to an Israelite prophet named Isaiah. That last moniker is admittedly hard to see at first. It's a dry arid land. But Israel specializes in "desert agriculture." Whereas the rest of the world fights against encroaching desertification and the degradation of fertile farmland, the people of Israel specialize in transforming the desert into fruitful, agricultural fields. They invest 4.3% of their GDP in agricultural research and development, provide 95% of their own food supply, and are a major exporter of fresh produce. It's truly a miracle and a glimpse of the picture Isaiah once saw all those years ago.

"Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes." (Isaiah 5:1-2)

Our guide is a man named Rami. He is Israeli by citizenship, having been born in Nazareth. He is Palestinian by nationality. He is Arab by ethnicity. He is Christian by religion. Listening to him share his story is fascinating as he sits personally at the intersection of so many of the political and social dynamics in play in this country. He is a joyful man. He laughs easily. He clearly loves his land and loves his people. He wishes for peace. You can literally hear the longing in his voice for a day when all the different tribes and faiths who lay claim to this land will humble themselves together before the Lord. However, you can also hear his despair. As I listen to him, I think about the call on Isaiah's life and wonder if he ever felt some of the same despair as well?

"And the Lord said, "Go, and say to this people: Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled." The holy seed is its stump." (Isaiah 6:9-13)

So where does Isaiah find hope? Where can Rami find hope? Where can we find hope even as we pilgrimage through this weary land the Lord loves so much? We can trust only in God. We cannot fall prey to falsehood and conspiracies. We cannot trust those who would seek power and privilege at the expense of others. We cannot assume human governments will do justice and love mercy. We cannot give into fear though we undergo all kinds of violence and suffering and heartbreak and pain. No, we must heed Isaiah's call. "The Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he will become a sanctuary…" (Isaiah 8:13-14a)

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 9-12

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July 12, 2022

Seeing the Light

Readings for today: Isaiah 9-12

It's one thing to read the prophecies of Isaiah about the Messiah. It's another to actually visit the "land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali" and see where God made glorious "the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations." Our guide told us the very first day that we would never read our Bibles the same way again. I believed him then but I didn't grasp how much my reading would truly change. After all, I've been reading through the Bible each year for over twenty years. I love the Scriptures. I hear God speak to me through His Word. There is nothing I get more excited about than sharing God's Word with others, whether from the pulpit in the church I serve or across a table and a cup of coffee at Fika.

But now I find myself visiting places like Caesarea, Tiberias, Mt. Carmel, Joppa, and Galilee. These are no longer names on a page to me but places I've visited. Roads I've walked. Vistas I've seen. I couldn't help but think of Jonah as I stood at the ancient port of Joppa. I couldn't help but think of Elijah as I stood on the slopes of Mt. Carmel. I couldn't help but think of Joseph and Mary and Jesus and his brothers growing up in Nazareth. I knelt down in each place to grab a handful of dust. I touched the indents of thousands of sandals impressed upon the ancient cobblestones. I took deep breaths of the unique smells wafting through each place. And through it all, the words of Isaiah kept ringing in my ears…

"But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this." (Isaiah 9:1-7)

God seems very near over here. His presence fills this land. The memory of His redemptive acts throughout history come alive. They take on three-dimensional shape. They go from analog black and white to full on digital 4K color. And still none of this is possible without saving faith. It is the Holy Spirit who opens our eyes to see and our hearts to understand. Only when we invite Him into our lives, keep in step with Him, and trust Him to complete His sanctifying work in us, will we find ourselves walking in light rather than darkness. Joy rather than sorrow. Victory rather than defeat. For this is the heritage of all those who trust in the "child who was born, the son who was given."

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 1-4

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July 13, 2022

Lessons from Megiddo

Readings for today: Micah 1-4

I recently stood on the tel of Megiddo looking over thirty different layers of history dating back to the Canaanites. The layers tell the story of city after city that was raised and destroyed over centuries. Over that period of time, a mound began to grow as each city was built on top of the next. Eventually the city was abandoned after the Assyrian invasion in 732BC. For hundreds of years, it sat there waiting to be discovered. Grasses and trees and bushes and flowers grew on top of it until a team of archaeologists in the 19th century began to probe it's depths. Today it remains a treasure trove to those who want to learn more about the different civilizations that came and went at this particular place.

I thought about Megiddo when I read these words from Micah today…"Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height." (Micah 3:12) The judgment of God is harsh and unyielding at times. He simply will not allow evil and idolatry to go unchecked. In my experience, judgment always begins at the house of the Lord. God holds His people to a higher standard. Called and set apart to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth, He demands more from us. We are to serve as living examples of what life in God's Kingdom is all about. This is why it's so tragic when we fail. When we follow the ways of the world. When we allow injustice and oppression and unrighteousness and idolatry to rule and reign over our lives. When we pursue power and wealth and trample those who might get in our way. God will not be mocked. Though we are His chosen people, He will not spare us. Though He loves Jerusalem and actually made His dwelling place there in the Temple, it did not stop Him from bringing judgment down on that place. Plowing her like a field. Making her a heap of ruins. Her house a wooded height.

This is what happens to Megiddo according to Scripture. It is destroyed along with the rest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel for her idolatry and sin. One of the amazing finds at this particular tel is a water tunnel running under ground protecting the water source of the city. It's a marvel of ancient engineering that was commissioned by King Ahab. Those who are familiar with Ahab know he presided over a period of relative wealth and political success in Israel. At the same time, he is also known as the most evil king in her history as he led her into all kinds of sin. His reign was marked by deep injustice and brutal oppression and severe drought. He worshipped Baal and forsook the Lord. He was the adversary of Elijah and eventually was killed in battle. However, the seeds of destruction were sown and eventually bore fruit in the reign of his descendants. Assyria swept in from the north and literally wiped the northern kingdom off the map.

Megiddo tells this story and also serves as a warning. We cannot presume upon the grace of God. We cannot ever fall into the trap of feeling entitled to the mercies of God. If we chase after other gods and follow the ways of this world, we can expect His judgment to fall. He will not spare us but will correct us and rebuke us so that we might find our way back to Him. God disciplines those He loves. He loves us so much He is willing to confront us and convict us and turn us over to the consequences of our choices. No matter what happens, He will bring to completion the good work He's begun in us to make us more like His Son.

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 5-7

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July 14, 2022

Justice. Love. Kindness. Humility.

Readings for today: Micah 5-7

I've spent the last day or so talking to our guide. As I shared in a previous devotional, Rami is Israeli by citizenship, Palestinian by nationality, Arab by ethnicity, and Christian by religion. This puts him squarely at the intersection of many of the different tension points that exist in this country. Interestingly enough, Rami is not a bitter or angry man. He just carries a great sorrow. He is burdened for his own people and for the nation of Israel. He has strong opinions but at the same time is honest enough to acknowledge the deep complexities that exist. Today I asked him if he could see a way forward. "To be honest, probably not. The system is simply broken. But at the same time, if we would just learn to listen and treat each other as human beings worthy of dignity and honor and respect as image-bearers of God, perhaps we might find a way." I shared with him that I often have those same feelings about my own country and the challenges we face. No matter where you go in the world today, oppression and injustice and hatred and rage and violence seem to be the rule rather than the exception. How in the world can we ever flip this script?

Sadly, nothing is new under the sun. The prophet Micah saw some of the same dynamics in his country thousands of years ago. What was his prescription? Listen again to those famous words from Micah 6:8, "He 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?" It seems so simple. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly before God. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else. This is how God defines what is good. This is what it means to be a godly nation. This is the only way to secure God's blessing. Where injustice and hate and pride are allowed to take root, God turns His face. He gives us over to the consequences of our decisions. He withdraws His protective hand. The result is violence and chaos and suffering and despair. We see this dynamic play out over and over again both in the Bible and throughout human history.

Judgment begins at the household of God. Micah is speaking to the people of God. People who know His Word. People who worship Him at His Temple. People who, at least in theory, have set their hearts to listen to His voice and obey His commands. If they will not do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God then who will? This is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable. It's why the scandals that have rocked the church in recent years are so tragic. It's why the abuse is so horrifying. It's why the hypocrisy is so heart-breaking. How can we expect those who are lost to find the way of Jesus compelling when we don't? How can we expect those who do not believe to find Jesus attractive when we barely can get out of bed to spend time with Him? How can we expect our nations to pass righteous laws and enact just social policies that balance mercy and grace and kindness without the church leading the way?

Friends, we have much work to do and here's the good news. It begins with a single step. It begins when you and I choose to do the next right thing. It begins when we humble ourselves before God in prayer. Falling on our knees before Him in repentance and confession of sin. It begins when we leverage whatever influence we have over the people we love and organizations we lead and the communities we serve to bring about the justice, kindness, and mercy of God. This is good and this is what the Lord requires of us.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 16-17, 2 Chronicles 28

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July 15, 2022

Samaria

Readings for today: 2 Kings 16-17, 2 Chronicles 28

"And the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the people of Israel. And they took possession of Samaria and lived in its cities…To this day they do according to the former manner. They do not fear the Lord, and they do not follow the statutes or the rules or the law or the commandment that the Lord commanded the children of Jacob, whom he named Israel." (2 Kings 17:24, 34)

Samaria. The heart of the former northern kingdom of Israel. Utterly destroyed by the Assyrians in the 8th century BC. The people of God deported and scattered throughout the empire. New people groups from all over imported in. They brought their own gods with them. They mixed and married with the people left in the land. The result was a melting pot of culture and religion and ethnicity that made the area anathema to the Jews. It's hard to overstate the animosity Jews held for their Samaritan neighbors. And yet Jesus intentionally visited this region. Intentionally sought to save the Samaritan people. And Jesus sends us not only into this region but to the ends of the earth as well. (Acts 1:8)

It's one thing to read these stories. It's quite another to stand in Caesarea itself on the shores of the Mediterranean. It's powerful to stand before the home of Simon the tanner where Peter receives his vision from the Lord of a great Gentile mission. There are no words when you stand in front of St. Peter's in Joppa and ponder the fact that it was intentionally built with an orientation to the west rather than the east to point God's people to the fulfillment of the Great Commission. (Admittedly, Joppa is a little south of Samaria but the point holds.)

How did it all begin? In tragedy and heartbreak. The kings of Israel abandoned their faith in God. They led God's people into all kinds of idolatry. They modeled their reigns after that of their pagan neighbors. They wanted to be kings who ruled like the other kings of the earth. Again, the result is judgment. Exile. Death. Destruction. Some people I know can't believe God would ever do such a thing. They believe God's judgment calls into question his goodness. They blame God for creating our mess in the first place. Such arguments are fundamentally flawed. They ignore human freedom and responsibility. They are deflections. Attempts to shift the blame off ourselves for pain and suffering we bring down on ourselves. As creatures made in God's image and given dominion by God over His creation, we are accountable for the way we choose to live our lives. Created to bring God glory and graciously steward all God has made, we will be judged based in no small part on how we do. Called by God to love Him first and love our neighbor as ourselves, we will be held liable for every careless word, thought, deed, and act of worship. This is sobering and would be downright scary except for Jesus Christ. He is faithful where we are not. He is true where we are false. He is whole where we are broken. He is good and He is love and He offers His own life in place of our own so that we may live.

What will we do with such a gift? How will we choose to live in response to what God has done for us? For me, it almost ups the ante. I find myself wanting to commit more and more of myself to Him because of how He has committed Himself to me. I find myself wanting to serve Him with all my heart because of how He first served me. I find myself pursuing faithful obedience not out of obligation but from a deep sense of gratitude that my God would die for me. This is the heart of the gospel and it is for Jews and Samaritans and Gentiles and anyone who would call on the name of the Lord.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 13-17

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July 16, 2022

Refuge

Readings for today: Isaiah 13-17

God's Kingdom is a refuge. A sanctuary for all who seek shelter. A place we can run to when we are in trouble. A safe and secure place where we will find help in our time of need. It is a refuge for all people. The nations of the earth. The many different tribes. The diverse cultures and languages. It is a place for the desperate. For those in despair. For those who have lost all hope. For those who are oppressed. Persecuted. Poor. Needy.

God's Kingdom was established on earth through a family. A man named Abraham and a woman named Sarah. They had a son named Isaac. He had two sons named Esau and Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons who became the ancestors of the nation of Israel. God forged His Kingdom through fire and suffering in the land of Egypt. He shaped His Kingdom as they wandered in the desert. He taught them humility and dependence and how to worship Him in spirit and in truth. He gave His Kingdom a land. A place to call their own. They called it Israel. Set up to be a light to the nations. The hope of the world. A place where all who sought God could find Him. A refuge for the alien and stranger and sojourner.

Israel failed. She turned inward. She lost sight of her high calling. She built up her walls. The refuge became a fortress. A stronghold where only the pure could find a home. Her gates were closed to those on the outside. She no longer served the nations but expected the nations to serve her. She grew proud and arrogant. She grew wealthy and strong. But her wickedness grew as well. Her appetites were insatiable. Her greed knew no ends. She abandoned truth and justice and mercy. She chased after other gods. And her fall was great. God's judgment swift and terrible. The nations of the earth who once looked to her for wisdom now marched through her streets, laying waste to everything in their path. But God did not abandon her. He retained a remnant. A holy seed that would grow up into a shoot and bear fruit once again.

This remnant would begin the work of God's Kingdom anew. They would start over. They would rebuild a refuge amidst the ruins. Listen to how Isaiah puts it, "Give counsel; grant justice; make your shade like night at the height of noon; shelter the outcasts; do not reveal the fugitive; let the outcasts of Moab sojourn among you; be a shelter to them from the destroyer. When the oppressor is no more, and destruction has ceased, and he who tramples underfoot has vanished from the land, then a throne will be established in steadfast love, and on it will sit in faithfulness in the tent of David one who judges and seeks justice and is swift to do righteousness." (Isaiah 16:3-5)

Friends, God's call remains the same for His people today. We are called to create a refuge, a sanctuary, a safe and secure place where people can find shelter from the storm. We are called to be a generous people, offering hospitality to all in need. We are called to be a loving and faithful people, always seeking to serve rather than be served. We are called to be a just and righteous people, holding fast to what is good and noble and right and true. We are called to look outward rather than inward. To let our light shine bright and bold so those who wander may find a way back home.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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July 18, 2022

Mount Zion

Readings for today: Isaiah 18-22

All roads eventually lead to Zion. The mountain of God. The summit where Abraham first came to sacrifice Isaac. The city of David. The place where God made His dwelling among His people. The very spot where the New Jerusalem will descend when Jesus returns. It's not hard to see why. Yesterday, we made the journey from Jericho to Jerusalem. We ascended four thousand feet from the Dead Sea to the Mount of Olives where we got our first look at the city. It was breathtaking. We drove through a tunnel that's been drilled through the Mount of Olives and as we emerged on the other side, we could see the Dome of the Rock gleaming in the distance. My heart leapt within me as I'm sure it does for most people when they make the pilgrimage over here.

I thought about that first glimpse when I read these words this morning from Isaiah, "At that time tribute will be brought to the Lord of hosts from a people tall and smooth, from a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide, to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the Lord of hosts." (Isaiah 18:7) Now I know Isaiah's not talking about me but it's hard not to read myself into the text. I have come to bring tribute. I come from a nation mighty and conquering. A people feared near and far. And I am not the only one. This is a trek many Americans make - especially American Christians - each and every year. We come to Mount Zion, to the place of the name of the Lord of hosts, to experience His presence and see His glory firsthand. We come to walk where Jesus walked. Weep where Jesus wept. Read His words again in the very places He first spoke them. The Bible comes alive over here. It takes on fresh meaning. It reminds us that what we believe is no mere myth or story but actual history.

One of the questions that often gets asked when people are on pilgrimage over here is "why is Israel so important?" "What makes it such coveted territory?" After all, the land is arid and dry. Water can be scarce. It's definitely not a lush paradise. Still, this land has been contested for millennia. It holds strategic importance as the land bridge between the great civilizations in Anatolia (modern day Turkey), Mesopotamia, and Egypt. God knew exactly what He was doing when He decided to claim this land as His own. He knew He was literally placing His people at the crossroads of civilization. He knew it was here that the peoples of the earth would come and see the glory of the One True and Living God. He knew it was here that the nations of the earth would stream to catch a glimpse of His glory. I love the vision Isaiah presents in 19:19-25, "In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt. When they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a savior and defender, and deliver them. And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them. And the Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing, and they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their pleas for mercy and heal them. In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance."

God has a plan, friends. And that plan involves every tribe and tongue and nation standing together before the throne of God. It involves every culture and color on the planet coming to Mt. Zion to kneel before the Lord of hosts. It involves Jew and Samaritan and Gentile all coming together to worship and bring Him praise. And the great news is the church is the forerunner of that reality! The church is called to give the world a taste of what's to come! This is why the gospel is such good news!

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July 19, 2022

Wastelands

Readings for today: Isaiah 23-26

"Behold, the Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants. And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the creditor, so with the debtor. The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered; for the Lord has spoken this word. The earth mourns and withers; the world languishes and withers; the highest people of the earth languish. The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left." (Isaiah 24:1-6)

Yesterday, we traveled down through the wilderness of Judea to the region of the Dead Sea. From 2500 feet above sea level in Jerusalem to 1500 feet below sea level at the seashore. I have never seen such a wasteland. The cliffs were barren and desolate. The dunes were rocky and void of life. The heat was oppressive. Water is scarce. Nothing can grow on its own as a result. I imagine this is what Isaiah had in mind when he prophesied judgment over God's people. They could look down from Mount Zion and literally see the desolation of the Lord. They had traveled those lands. They had tasted the salty sea. They knew firsthand the hardship and suffering that accompanied those who tried to scratch out a life in a land full of death.

Look at the picture again for today's devotional. This is what the land looks like under the curse of sin. The land languishes, unable to produce any fruit. The earth is scorched under the blazing hot sun. The wastelands are empty and endless and seemingly stretch in every direction. Now consider the deeper meaning behind Isaiah's words. The soul of his people is a similar wasteland. Their hearts are far from God and living under a curse. Devoured by sin, they produce little fruit. They perish for lack of access to the living waters of their God. The result is pain and hardship and suffering and death. None shall be spared. People, priest, slave, master, maid, mistress, buyer, seller…all will come under the judgment of God.

The same is true in our day as well. Violence and strife. Rage and hate. Injustice and oppression. Greed and selfishness. These are all the hallmarks of a people rushing headlong into destruction. A nation given over by God to the curse of sin. And before we look outward to blame those around us, we must first look inward and ask ourselves about the state of our own souls. How have we "transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant?" Where have we sinned and fallen short of God's glory? How have we personally contributed to the mess we are in by paying lip service to God while remaining far from Him in our hearts? Are our lives a spiritual wasteland or a fruitful garden for the Lord? Are we spiritual desolate with seemingly no life of God within us? Do we languish under the curse of sin, refusing to surrender and humble ourselves before the Lord?

You see, friends, what happens on a macro level in our country is simply a reflection of what is taking place on a micro level in each of our lives. The only thing that's different is the scale. And if we truly want to make a change, it must begin with us. It must begin with each of us committing ourselves to seek the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. It must begin with the people of God gathering to worship God in Spirit and in truth. This is the only way to stave off the judgment to come.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 18:1-8, 2 Chronicles 29-31, Psalms 48

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July 20, 2022

The House of the Lord

Readings for today: 2 Kings 18:1-8, 2 Chronicles 29-31, Psalms 48

"Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King." (Psalm 48:1-2)

It's one thing to read about the restoration of the Temple and the covenant renewal that took place in Israel under the reign of Hezekiah and another to actually stand in the place where it happened. Not much is left of the Temple of course. Today two mosques dominate the Temple Mount and yet one can still walk the steps that lead to the Huldah Gates. One can pray at the Western Wall. One can walk on the same paving stones millions of faithful Jews once walked as they came to the Temple to worship. It's incredible. The restoration of the Temple is a flashpoint politically over here. If one were to attempt what Hezekiah once did, it would ignite a massive conflict because the Temple Mount is considered holy by Muslims, Jews, and Christians alike.

One has to admire the courage of Hezekiah. Cleansing and rebuilding the Temple was no easy effort even in his own day. Yes, he didn't have to contend with a religion like Islam but destroying the high places, cutting down the Asherah poles, and grinding the bronze snake Moses once held up as a sign of deliverance to dust would have made him a lot of enemies. The logistics of re-establishing the Levitical priesthood had to be overwhelming. The cost of the repairs would have emptied the royal treasury. And to top things off, he calls all of Israel to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Feast. Hundreds of thousands of people came. Indeed, there had not been a Passover like this since the days of Solomon! They continued the work of cleansing the city of her idols and restoring true worship in the Temple. Their hearts were turned to the Lord. It was nothing short of revival.

All because one person had the courage to live out his convictions. One person had the courage to do what was right and good and faithful before the Lord. One person submitted his time and talent and treasure to the work of the Lord. One person sought the Lord with all his heart and God honored his prayers and devotion and sacrifice. Listen to how the chronicler describes it, "Thus Hezekiah did throughout all Judah, and he did what was good and right and faithful before the Lord his God. And every work that he undertook in the service of the house of God and in accordance with the law and the commandments, seeking his God, he did with all his heart, and prospered." (2 Chronicles 31:20-21)

What about you? It's doubtful you and I will ever wield the authority of a king over a nation but what about the spiritual authority God has entrusted to us over our homes? Our marriages? Our children? Our grandchildren? What about the spiritual authority God's given us in our workplace? Schools? Communities? What about the spiritual authority God's entrusted to us in the church? Among our fellow believers? Every single Christian is indwelt with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Every single Christian walks in Christ's authority in everything they say and do. As such, we've been given divine power to tear down every stronghold and every high thing that sets itself up against the knowledge and worship of God. If revival is to come in our time. If revival is to come to our families and our churches and our communities, it must come to us first. Our hearts must be stirred just as Hezekiah's was stirred to courageously and boldly and humbly and faithfully serve the Lord.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 27-30

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July 21, 2022

Cornerstone

Readings for today: Isaiah 27-30

“Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation; whoever believes will not be in haste.” (Isaiah 28:16)

I thought about these words throughout our trip. Each of the churches we went to seemed built upon a particular stone. There was the Church of the Nativity where one could touch the stones on which the manger lay. There was the Monastery of the Temptation where one could gaze upon the stone on which Jesus sat while being tempted by the devil. There was the stone of Golgotha where Jesus was crucified. And there was the stone of the empty tomb where Jesus rose from the dead. Praying at each of these places was powerful. One could literally feel the weight of glory pressed into each of these stones and it makes Isaiah’s words from today’s reading come to life even more.

“And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plumb line; and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter. Then your covenant of death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand…” (Isaiah 28:17-18)

God has established an everlasting covenant with His people. A covenant of life not death. A covenant of joy not sorrow. A covenant of peace not conflict. A covenant of grace not condemnation. Here in the Holy Land we see signs of that covenant all around us. The Western Wall where faithful Jews still gather to pray. The tombs on the slopes of the Kidron Valley where faithful Jews have been buried for centuries with the hope of greeting the Messiah when He comes. The many different churches and shrines marking the places where Jesus lived and taught and suffered and died and rose again. The Holy Land presents one of the most powerful testimonies to the truth and hope of the gospel and it’s why every believer should try to make the trip here at least once in their lives.

Because God Himself has laid the chief cornerstone in Jesus Christ, we who believe in Him will never be put to shame. We can trust Him to be faithful. We can trust Him to be our refuge and strength in times of trouble. Our stronghold and refuge when the storms of life come. Nothing will shake a foundation that is built on Christ. Rather than seeking to save ourselves, we can respond to God’s gracious call, “Thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, In repentance and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength…the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore He exalts Himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for Him.”

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 31-35

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July 22, 2022

Escape Routes

Readings for today: Isaiah 31-35

So today is my last day in Jordan and we went to a Greek Orthodox Church with a famous mosaic on the floor. It's a map of the trade routes of the ancient Middle East. Part of the map was destroyed by earthquakes that have hit this region. Other parts were carried off by pilgrims over the centuries. Most of the map remains and it essentially shows the King's Highway from the Sea of Galilee through the Dead Sea down into the Red Sea. It highlights significant cities along the way like Hebron, Jericho, Bethlehem, and especially Jerusalem which is where almost all caravans in the ancient world were headed. It also highlights the many Byzantine churches that had been built in the region, giving travelers a road map that would help them find places for food and rest and especially water along the way. It's truly an amazing sight and one of the many reasons Christians should take the time to visit Jordan.

I thought of the map when I read today's text. I've always wondered why Israel would ever be tempted to flee to Egypt. Why go back to the nation that enslaved them? Why go back and seek help from a regime that had brutally oppressed them for hundreds of years? Why place your life at risk by undertaking a hard journey through the desert wilderness? Well, when one looks at the map, it becomes relatively clear. Caravans often made their way up from Egypt to Syria along the King's Highway. This was a well-traveled road filled with all kinds of people from all kinds of different tribes and nations. When the other nations were defeated or faced a grave threat, they fled north or south depending on where the threat was coming from. In short, Israel was simply following in the same footsteps as the nations around them. Flying to Egypt to escape the Assyrian invasion would have made perfect sense to an ancient person living in the Middle East at the time.

But God wanted something different. God wanted His people to trust in Him. God wanted His people look to the Holy One of Israel for their salvation rather than the pharaohs of Egypt. God wanted His people to consult Him before making any decisions rather than trust in the common wisdom of the day. The Egyptians are just men. They are not gods. Their horses are flesh not spirit. Their military might is nothing compared to the might of God. The only one who can save Israel from the wrath of the Assyrian army is the Lord of hosts.

"And the Assyrian shall fall by a sword, not of man; and a sword, not of man, shall devour him; and he shall flee from the sword, and his young men shall be put to forced labor. His rock shall pass away in terror, and his officers desert the standard in panic," declares the Lord, whose fire is in Zion, and whose furnace is in Jerusalem." (Isaiah 31:8-9)

What was true for God's people back then remains true for God's people today. Only God can deliver us from the struggles and trials we face. Only God can protect us from the evil one who prowls about looking to devour and destroy. Only God can deliver us from sin and death and it is to Him we must turn. We must learn to seek God again. Not just on our own but when we are together. Worship. Bible studies. Small groups. Leadership meetings. All present opportunities to seek the Lord as a community of believers. And the promise of God is sure. If we seek God with all our hearts, He will make Himself known to us. We will experience Him in a powerful way. And He will give us the strength to stand firm when the storms of life come.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 36-37, 2 Kings 18:9-37, 19, 2 Chronicles 32:1-23, Psalms 76

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July 23, 2022

Empty Threats

Readings for today: Isaiah 36-37, 2 Kings 18:9-37, 19, 2 Chronicles 32:1-23, Psalms 76

Standing on the top of the ancient citadel in Amman, Jordan is eye-opening. The history of the site can be traced back to the Bronze Age (3300-1200BC) and has been conquered several times. The Persians, Greeks, Nabateans, Romans, Byzantines, Umayyads, Abbasids, Fatimids, Ayyubids, Mamelukes, and Ottomans all had their day. Every time a new empire would sweep in, they would often raze the city to the ground and rebuild on top of it. They would establish their dominance by repurposing important, often sacred structures like churches, as storage rooms or stables or trash dumps. It's fascinating to walk through the ancient streets and think about all the different tribes and nations that called this place their home.

It also gives you a sense of the threat Hezekiah was facing when the Assyrian army invaded. They had just wiped out Israel to the north. Now they were moving south with designs to end up in Egypt. Assyria seemed unstoppable. They had crushed nation after nation. Forcibly uprooting the populace and sending them into exile. Their war machine was brutal. They left nothing but complete destruction in their wake. They believed they were following a sacred call. Destroying god after god to demonstrate the supremacy of their own god, Nisroch. Not only that but Judah was weak. She could barely seat an army of a couple of thousand. She had no chance against an army that was almost 100 times her size. Resistance seemed futile. Their fate sealed. All hope lost. But Hezekiah turned to the Lord. He called on God to hear the mockery of the Assyrians. He called on God for deliverance and salvation. He called on God to make His name known by destroying the most powerful nation on earth at the time. And God hears Hezekiah's prayers. God responds to Hezekiah's cries. He sends His avenging angel to strike down the Assyrians. He sent Sennacherib back home in disgrace where he is assassinated by his own children.

The Lord makes all human threats empty. No empire - no matter how mighty and strong - can defeat Him. No weapon that is fashioned against Him shall stand. No king or emperor can aspire to ascend His throne. God will brook no rivals. God will allow no pretenders. God will not be mocked. Not by any human being, great or small. Listen to how God Himself describes it in Isaiah 37:23-29, "Whom have you mocked and reviled? Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes to the heights? Against the Holy One of Israel! By your servants you have mocked the Lord, and you have said, With my many chariots I have gone up the heights of the mountains, to the far recesses of Lebanon, to cut down its tallest cedars, its choicest cypresses, to come to its remotest height, its most fruitful forest. I dug wells and drank waters, to dry up with the sole of my foot all the streams of Egypt. Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? I planned from days of old what now I bring to pass, that you should make fortified cities crash into heaps of ruins, while their inhabitants, shorn of strength, are dismayed and confounded, and have become like plants of the field and like tender grass, like grass on the housetops, blighted before it is grown. I know your sitting down and your going out and coming in, and your raging against me. Because you have raged against me and your complacency has come to my ears, I will put my hook in your nose and my bit in your mouth, and I will turn you back on the way by which you came."

Friends, greater is He that lives in you than is in the world. With God at your side, you can stand against a legion. You can leap over a wall. The next time you feel anxious or afraid. The next time you feel isolated and alone. The next time you start to doubt the provision and protection and power and promise of God, read Psalms 18. Claim David's words as your own. Let them fill you with peace and a deep sense of security. God is on your side!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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July 25, 2022

Healing Prayer

Readings for today: Isaiah 38-39, 2 Kings 20:1-21, 2 Chronicles 32:24-33

One of the things I've learned from all my travels around the globe is the power of healing prayer. Believe it or not, there are millions around the world today who do not have access to anything but the most rudimentary form of healthcare. Infant mortality rates are high. Life expectancy is low. They live with sickness, disease, and death on a daily basis. They have no recourse but God so they lean on Him for healing and strength. I have prayed for healing alongside believers in the slums of Addis Ababa, rural villages in Uganda, among South Sudanese refugees, North Korean defectors, and for Palestinian believers who are displaced in their own country. I have watched God's Spirit intervene miraculously to bring sight to the blind, healing from different diseases, strength to those who are weak and on the brink of death, even raise the dead.

King Hezekiah was sick to the point of death. He had no access to modern healthcare. Little in the way of hope. In fact, the prophet Isaiah even visited to give him the dire news. "Thus says the Lord: Set your house in order for you shall die, you shall not recover." (Is. 38:1) And what was Hezekiah's response? He turned to the Lord in prayer. He asked for healing. It's a simple prayer. Not a lot of words. Not a lot of drama. He just turns his face to the wall and calls on God to remember his faithfulness. "Please, O Lord, remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight." (Is. 38:2) It's a prayer of trust. A prayer of faith. A prayer of surrender. However God chooses to respond, Hezekiah is prepared to accept the answer. Through his tears, he commits his life and his fate to God.

God chooses to answer Hezekiah's prayer. He heals him from his disease and adds fifteen years to his life. Note that God's answer serves an even larger purpose. Hezekiah's healing will be accompanied by the even greater miracle of God's deliverance of His people. God Himself will defend them and protect them from the Assyrian king. To top things off, God gives Hezekiah a sign. He makes the shadow cast by the sun turn back ten steps. It's an amazing miracle. Hezekiah is saved. Israel is delivered. God is glorified.

So why doesn't this happen more often? Why do miracles seem so rare in our day and age? Why does Gods seem so silent in the face of our prayers? Perhaps it's just a matter of perspective. I can't tell you the number of times I have prayed with those who are sick and dying in our own country. I've been at the sides of countless hospital beds asking God for miracles. Recently, I prayed with a good friend who I've known for thirty years who was on death's door. She had been told by her doctors to put her affairs in order. She would not make it beyond a few weeks. We spent an hour talking through her funeral. But before I left, we prayed. We asked God for healing. We asked God to intervene. We asked God to remember her faithfulness. We told God we trusted Him. We knew she was in His good hands no matter the outcome. The next day her body began to respond to the treatment. Within a few days, they were talking about rehab. Within a week or so, she was coming home. It was nothing short of a miracle.

God often works His miracles through ordinary means. It could be a cake of figs (Is. 38:21) or oxygen and anti-biotics. God's healing can happen instantaneously or it can happen over time. And no matter what happens, it must be acknowledged that healing in this world is always incomplete. We are mortal, finite creatures. The reality is Hezekiah didn't live forever. He was given fifteen more years. My dear friend won't live forever. She's simply been given the gift of a little more time. None of us will live forever. Our lives will be filled with all kinds of joy and sorrow, health and sickness, pleasures and pain. The real question is what will we do with the time we've been given?

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 40-42, Psalms 46

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July 26, 2022

The Comfort of God

Readings for today: Isaiah 40-42, Psalms 46

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

Today’s reading is awesome. The picture of God taking us by the hand and leading us is tender and special. Isaiah speaks of a God who comforts. A God who forgives. A God who gathers His people in His arms like a shepherd gathers little lambs. Let the power of these words wash over you as you reflect and pray today...

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord 's hand double for all her sins.” (Is. 40:1-2)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 43-45, Psalms 80

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July 27, 2022

Calling

Readings for today: Isaiah 43-45, Psalms 80

One of things I often do when I travel overseas is look at the tracking map they make available while you're onboard. It's a great way to pass the time. I watch as cities like London, Paris, Rome, Cairo, Khartoum, Juba, Entebbe, Bahiir Dar, Asmara, Djibouti, Jeddah, Mogadishu, and Aden all come into view. I've flown over Greenland, Iceland, and Europe as I make my way to the Horn of Africa. I've fallen love with this part of the world. God has given me a heart for the people over there. I have dear friends in Ethiopia, Uganda, and South Sudan. They are some of my spiritual heroes and heroines. They are engaged in the great work of taking the light of the gospel into some very dark places. They encounter a lot of idolatry. The worship of false gods. And when you've seen some of the things I've seen, Isaiah's words don't seem so foreign or unfamiliar. "The carpenter stretches a line; he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it." (Isaiah 44:13-15) The thing is…I've met these carpenters. I've seen the craftsmen hard at work fashioning their idols. I've watched them bow down before them and it shatters my heart. I've wept over the lost. I've held those who are sick. I've prayed with those who are dying. I've seen the desperately poor. And I've dedicated my life to bringing them the hope of the gospel.

"But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1) I believe with all my heart that God called me for such a time as this. God created and fashioned me for this purpose. He redeemed me so many years on the campus of the University of Colorado in Boulder so that I might fulfill His great plan to bring the gospel to the nations. This is why He called me by name. To set me apart. To serve His purposes. To take all that I am and all that I have and use me for His glory. I have no identity of my own. I have nothing to call my own. This is not just something I do in my spare time or support with the leftovers of my life. This is literally the reason I exist. "Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you; you are my servant…I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you." (Isaiah 44:21-22)

Now you may be tempted to dismiss this as my individual calling. Something unique to Doug Resler but nothing could be further from the truth. Every single person who calls on the name of the Lord has been saved and set apart for this glorious purpose…to bring the gospel to the nations! It starts right outside your front door and extends to the very ends of the earth. Every resource you've been given. Every gift you've received. Every talent you've developed. Every life experience you've gone through. God has carefully orchestrated all these things in order to prepare you for His service. By the way, this is true whether you acknowledge Him or not! Consider the example of Cyrus the Persian from our reading today! The reality is you don't have to go to Africa to see idolatry. You don't have to go to the Middle East to see the worship of false gods. Our nation and our neighborhoods are just as dark as places like Juba and Khartoum and Entebbe. The people we live among need the gospel just as desperately as the people I will have the opportunity to go and serve this fall. When it comes to the Kingdom of God and the promise of eternal life, we hold no advantage. We have no privilege of position. We will not be "boarding" first or get any special treatment. God has given us a truly GREAT

commission. To share the good news of the gospel. To go and tell the nations of all He has done! To sing a new song! To lift up praise to our King! To place our lives in His hands for Him to use as He sees fit according to His divine plan.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 46-49, Psalms 135

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July 28, 2022

Lean on God

Readings for today: Isaiah 46-49, Psalms 135

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

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

Turn to God. Let Him bear the burden of your life. Trust the One who shaped and formed you in your mother's womb. Trust the One who gave you breath and life at your birth. Trust the One who endowed you with your gifts and talents and abilities. Trust the One who knows every hair on your head. If you'll let Him, He will lift you up. If you'll lean on Him, He will give you strength. If you trust Him, He will never let you down. He has made you. He has borne you. He has carried you. He will save you. This is his promise.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 50-53

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July 29, 2022

Suffering Servant

Readings for today: Isaiah 50-53

I am extremely blessed to be friends with a man named John Rucyahana. John is a retired Anglican bishop who chairs the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Rwanda. For almost thirty years, he has been engaged in helping his country recover from the horrific genocide in 1994. As such, he has wrestled deeply with the question, "Where was God as over one million people were being slaughtered?" And here is his answer in his own words, "Where was God when a million innocent people were being butchered? Where was God when priests and pastors helped massacre the people in their churches? I'll tell you where God was. He was alongside the victims lying on the cold stone floor of the cathedral. He was comforting a dying child. He was crying at the altar. But He was also saving lives. Many were saved by miracles. God does not flee when evil takes over a nation...God is the giver of eternal life, and He can bring great good out of any situation. He raises the dead; He can also raise the broken. He can restore their hearts and minds and lift their spirits to renewed life. In my country God is doing this today by the thousands. There is so much pain here, so many real tears, and so much guilt that our ministry is like preaching hope from the top of a pile of bones. From atop a mountain of mutilated bodies, we are stretching a hand upward to proclaim a message of transformation and recovery." (The Bishop of Rwanda)

I cannot fathom the journey so many in his country endured. The horror. The pain. The suffering. It's immense. Indescribable. Beyond words. And yet, I would argue the forgiveness and reconciliation they have found is equally, if not more, profound. When I visited the country several years ago, I asked a woman if she was ethnic Tutsi or Hutu. "Neither" was her reply. "Here we are all Rwandan." She went on to describe some of the hell she and her family had been through and the freedom they had found through forgiveness. Only Jesus could provide such grace. Only Jesus could give them such strength. How can I be so sure? Because Jesus knows the depths of human suffering. He experienced the absolute worst this world has to offer. He knows evil intimately and through his death defeats it once and for all. Listen to how the ancient prophet Isaiah describes the suffering of Jesus, some hundreds of years before His death and resurrection…

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

The same God who bore the sins of many. The same God who makes intercession for transgressors. The same God who loved His enemies so much He died for them is the same God who is alive and active in Rwanda. Bringing about reconciliation through forgiveness. Preaching hope from atop a pile of His own bones. From atop His own mutilated body, He is stretching a hand upward to proclaim a

message of transformation and grace. It’s truly incredible and it is available to all who would place their trust in Him. Friends, if God can bring about reconciliation between the victims and perpetrators of genocide in Rwanda can He not accomplish the same in our lives as well? Can He not bring together husband and wife on the verge of divorce? Can He not bring back together children and parents who’ve been estranged? Can He not help Democrats and Republicans find common ground? Can He not heal the racial tensions in our own country? These are just a few of the problems we face that only the gospel can solve.

What is required? Repentance. Confession. Truth-telling. Courage. Faith. Humility. Most of all, a deep and abiding and enduring trust in the power of the gospel.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 54-58

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July 30, 2022

Full Devotion

Readings for today: Isaiah 54-58

The great Reformer, Martin Luther, taught that we learn to hear God's voice in three primary ways. Oratio - Prayer. Meditatio - Meditation. En Tentatio - Within the "tensions" of real life. It is this last one that resonates most often with my heart. Many years ago, I took a trip to Rwanda. A nation still recovering from a horrific genocide that resulted in the death of over 1.1 million people. Spurred on by a racist national government with a history of systematic abuse and oppression, many ordinary, everyday people turned into rabid killers. They murdered and raped friends. Family members. Neighbors. Co-workers. Things turned so evil that some pastors turned on their congregations. They turned their church buildings into charnel houses. They lured their parishioners into traps with the promise of safety. One pastor even bulldozed his own church down on the heads of those he served. These events provide a dark backdrop to these words from Isaiah this morning...

"Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?' Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord? "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard." (Isaiah 58:3-8)

Rwanda was known for many years as a Christian nation. Some 90% of the population claimed to know Christ prior to the genocide. So how does one adequately explain how these same people ended carrying out one of the most gruesome pogroms in human history? Bishop John Rucyahana, a key figure in the forgiveness and reconciliation movement in the wake of the genocide, suggests it is because their Christianity only went skin deep. It hadn't penetrated to the heart. Yes, they worshipped. Yes, they fasted and prayed. They had all the appearance of godliness but they did not love God with their hearts. Isaiah was facing a similar situation in his own time. The people of God worshipped, fasted, sang, made sacrifices. They appeared to follow God's commands but in reality they were seeking their own pleasure. Their own power. The results were obvious to anyone who could see. Oppression of the weak. Violence. Dissention. Pride. All were hallmarks of Israel at the time.

In the face of evil, God calls His people back to Himself. He calls them to lay aside their comforts, their safety and security, their wants and desires to serve a higher calling. A greater purpose. To humble themselves before the Lord and lay their lives and their future in His hands. Prior to returning to Rwanda, Bishop John was leading a flourishing ministry in Uganda. He was doing God's work and many people were being saved. But God wanted Bishop John to leave his comfortable life and return to his own country. Bishop John reports hearing God telling him, "If you do not go there and present the healing gospel, then the fate of Rwanda will be in the hands of those who carry guns. If God is the remedy and the solution, whom shall He use, if you don't allow Him to use you?" This powerful message from the Holy Spirit convicted Bishop John and he laid everything aside to return home. Isaiah calls his people to a similar return. To return back to God in faithfulness and service. To "loose

the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke...to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house...” God promises that when His people commit their ways to Him, their light shall breakforth like the dawn and the glory of the Lord will be their rearguard.

So...here’s the challenge for us...do we believe these words are as much for us as they were for the people of God in Isaiah’s time? For the Hutus and Tutsis of Rwanda in the 1990’s? Do we believe God has called us to place our lives in His service? To loose the bonds of wickedness in our own communities and nation? To give all that we have and all that we are to the higher calling of righteousness and justice and peace? To set aside our own agendas and let God guide and direct our steps so that might serve the oppressed and hungry and helpless in our midst? This is what it means to follow Christ. There are no other options. There is no other way. Only full and undivided devotion will do.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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August 1, 2022

Freedom Comes With Responsibility

Readings for today: Isaiah 59-63

I have a running dialogue with a couple of friends who are atheists. Their questions are honest and real and sincere. They struggle with all the suffering they see in the world and they wonder how in the world God could stand by and let it happen. They question his goodness. They question his omnipotence. After all, how could a good God allow things like mass starvation and genocide? How could an all-powerful God not confront Putin and put an end to warfare and violence. Perhaps God is all-powerful but not good and therefore not to be trusted? Perhaps God is good but impotent in the face of evil and therefore unreliable? Either way, he's not much of a god and unworthy of our attention much less our worship and devotion.

The factor my friends fail to take into account is human freedom. When God created us, He made us in His image. He gave us dominion and authority over all He had made. He gave us the freedom to choose so that we would have the freedom to love. Love the world He has made. Love our fellow human beings. Love God. The freedom to choose means we have to accept responsibility for the consequences of our choices. Good or bad. Righteous or unrighteous. When we choose selfishness, greed, power, deceit, violence, and hate; we shouldn't be surprised when we reap a similar harvest in return. When we choose sacrifice, honor, love, grace, and mercy; we shouldn't be surprised when we reap those things as well. What is true for us as individuals is also true for us collectively as nations and it's why the world we live in is in such turmoil.

Isaiah saw all take place in his own day. He also could see it continuing to happen far into the future. Read his words again from Isaiah 59:1-13. They are convicting and sobering. The prophet lays out exactly why there is so much evil and suffering in the world. He pins all the responsibility on humanity's failure to love and obey God. "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. For your hands are defiled with blood and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies; your tongue mutters wickedness. No one enters suit justly; no one goes to law honestly; they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies, they conceive mischief and give birth to iniquity. They hatch adders' eggs; they weave the spider's web; he who eats their eggs dies, and from one that is crushed a viper is hatched. Their webs will not serve as clothing; men will not cover themselves with what they make. Their works are works of iniquity, and deeds of violence are in their hands. Their feet run to evil, and they are swift to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; desolation and destruction are in their highways. The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths; they have made their roads crooked; no one who treads on them knows peace. Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not overtake us; we hope for light, and behold, darkness, and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope for the wall like the blind; we grope like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among those in full vigor we are like dead men. We all growl like bears; we moan and moan like doves; we hope for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us. For our transgressions are multiplied before you, and our sins testify against us; for our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities: transgressing, and denying the Lord, and turning back from following our God, speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the heart lying words."

The fundamental reality is that God has given humanity all she needs to put an end to evil and suffering in our world. The earth produces more than enough food to make sure everyone single person gets fed.

World economies produce more than enough wealth to provide for the basic needs of every single person on the planet. Medical technology could easily bring an end to so much disease. Justice and righteousness are within our grasp if we can just look beyond class and race and gender. So why don't we do these things? The Bible's answer is clear though we may not like it. We are sinners. At a fundamental level, we are selfish. We look out for number one. We want what we want when we want it and we give too little thought to those around us. We believe we are the center of the universe and our needs are what are most important. Satisfying our desires is our highest priority. And the consequences to such an approach to life are evident all around us. It's why some have much and others have little. It's why some get ahead and some are left behind. It's why there is so much inequality among individuals and nations. We refuse to answer the call for which we were made…to be our brother and sister's keeper.

Thankfully, the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save nor His ear dull that He cannot hear. Though He has entrusted the world to us, He is not dependent on us. Though He has entrusted us with the welfare of our neighbor, He doesn't wait for us to act. Though He has given us dominion and authority over all things, He still reigns supreme. So in His time and in His way, He takes action. He sends a Redeemer. His name is Jesus. Listen to how Isaiah describes Him…"Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey. The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him. He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak. According to their deeds, so will he repay, wrath to his adversaries, repayment to his enemies; to the coastlands he will render repayment. So they shall fear the name of the Lord from the west, and his glory from the rising of the sun; for he will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of the Lord drives. "And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression," declares the Lord." (Isaiah 59:15-20)

Jesus sets us free from the power of sin and death. Jesus sets us free to love and serve others. Jesus sets us free to move from selfishness to selflessness. From greed to generosity. From hatred to compassion. From violence to peace. And those who follow Jesus are sent out into the world to "bring good news to the poor" and "bind up the broken-hearted" and "proclaim liberty to the captives" and the "year of the Lord's favor." (Isaiah 61) This is our responsibility as believers in Jesus Christ, friends, and it is why the church is the hope of the world.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 64-66

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August 2, 2022

Potter's Hand

Readings for today: Isaiah 64-66

Over the years, I've had the blessing of spending time with incredible men and women of faith from all over the world. House church pastors in China. Leaders of an underground railroad for North Korean refugees. Survivors of the Killing Fields in Cambodia. Church planters in Ethiopia, Uganda, and South Sudan. Foster parents in America. Military men and women who've seen and experienced the horrors of war. Police officers and fire fighters who come face to face with human suffering every single day. Single moms working multiple jobs to provide for their children. Older men and women serving as primary care-givers for their spouses with terminal illnesses. Inmates who find ways to love others in the midst of an often violent prison system. In each and every case, the challenges these dear friends face are overwhelming. The pain they experience is real. Frustration can often get the best of them. Sometimes they even despair. They ask God a lot of questions. "Why have you done this to me?" "Why are you letting this happen to me?" "Where are you in the midst of all I am suffering?" These questions are honest and real. The emotions raw and unfiltered. And there are no easy answers.

Isaiah grappled with similar questions in his own time. "Be not so terribly angry, O Lord, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people. Your holy cities have become a wilderness; Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins. Will you restrain yourself at these things, O Lord? Will you keep silent, and afflict us so terribly?" (Isaiah 64:9-12) He could see the coming judgment. He could see Jerusalem and the Promised Land laid waste. Everything he held dear would be lost. His entire way of life destroyed. One might think this would cause Isaiah to despair. To lose faith in God. But in the midst of his suffering and doubting and questioning, Isaiah hits upon a key insight. One that sustains him through the pain. "But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." (Isaiah 64:8)

God never promises life will be easy. In fact, He tells us quite clearly throughout the Scriptures that life in this world will be hard. There will be pain. There will be suffering. We live in a broken world. A world that is not as it should be. A world that is not how God intended it would be. It is a world of our own making. A world ravaged by sin and death. A world we created because we wanted to be like God. A world we continue to create because we still fall for the same lie over and over again. Yes, God never promises us an easy life but He does promise He will use all things - even our pain - for our good. He is the Potter. We are the clay. The clay doesn't ask the Potter, "Why have you made me like this?" The clay doesn't question the Potter's plans for it's life. The clay doesn't worry because the Potter knows what He's doing. He is shaping us for His own glory.

It's an ancient insight that still holds true today. It holds true for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord. No matter where you live. No matter what you do. No matter what your circumstances may be. God is the master potter. We are his clay. He has us right where He wants us...on His wheel...and He is shaping us to serve His purposes in this world. We have no need to ask Him, "Why?" No need to question His plans. We simply are called to trust and obey. To let the Potter do what the Potter does best. What is the Potter doing in your life today? How is He shaping you? How is He forming you? Where is He at work in you? Give Him thanks no matter what season you find yourself in.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 21, 2 Chronicles 33

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August 3, 2022

Leadership Impact

Readings for today: 2 Kings 21, 2 Chronicles 33

All of us are leaders. Leadership begins with self. Learning to control our thoughts and desires and channel them to godly action. Leadership continues in the family. We lead our families as fathers and mothers and teach our children to walk in God's ways. We lead at work as we use our influence - whether supervisor or employee - to impact the health and well-being of others and our organization's future. We lead at church by the way we worship and serve our brothers and sisters in Christ. We lead in every sphere of life so here's the critical question...what kind of leader are you? When the final analysis is in and the impact of your life is measured, will it be for good or for evil in the eyes of the Lord?

Manasseh reigned for over fifty years and in that time, "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel." (2 Kings 21:2) He reinstituted pagan idol worship, rebuilding the high places his father had torn down. He defiled the Temple by setting up altars to foreign gods. "He burned his sons as an offering in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, and used fortune-telling and omens and sorcery, and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger." (2 Chronicles 33:6) In short, he did more evil is reign than all the kings who had come before him and after he died, his son Ammon continued in his ways. It was the darkest period in the southern kingdom's history. The people were lead astray and the nation would perish as a result. Everything rises and falls on leadership.

In 1994, an unholy alliance between the racist government of Juvenal Habyarimana and the "Hutu Power" promoting media run by Hassan Ngeze combined to create the conditions whereby a horrific genocide became possible. In all, the genocide claimed the lives of over 1.1 million people. Most of them were killed by friends, neighbors, even family members. A national trauma survey by UNICEF estimates that 80% of Rwandan children experienced a death in their family in 1994. 70% witnessed someone being killed or injured and 90% believed they would die. The Habyarimana government, aided and abetted by the French who supplied them arms and training, worked hard to gain control over the country as they prepared to implement their own version of Hitler's "Final Solution." As the international community turned their backs on Rwanda, evil was allowed to flourish and the results were beyond tragic. Everything rises and falls on leadership.

Paul Kigame could see what was happening in his country. He saw the signs of genocide and he organized a resistance. He led a rebellion against a racist government and a racist national media and, as a result, potentially saved hundreds of thousands of lives. He is rightfully called a hero. But his leadership didn't stop there. He has worked hard to reintegrate the country. Establishing Unity and Reconciliation commissions where wrongs can be redressed, crimes confessed, forgiveness offered, and entire communities restored. This is perhaps his greatest accomplishment. Like Nelson Mandela before him, he refuses to allow hate to drive his leadership and his nation is reaping the benefits. (Of course, no leader is perfect. President Kagame's intolerance for political opposition is a dark stain on an otherwise exemplary record.) Everything rises and falls on leadership.

How are you leading in your life today?

Readings for tomorrow: Nahum 1-3

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August 4, 2022

The Honor of God

Readings for today: Nahum 1-3

Some things you can't unsee. Like the time I ran my first Bolder Boulder several years ago and saw the male belly dancers around mile four! :-) On a more serious note, now that I've become aware of the "honor/shame" dynamic running through all of Scripture, it seems like it's everywhere. Why does God judge Nineveh with such harshness? Why is He not just content to have the victory but goes further, grinding them into dust? Why does He put their nation to open shame? Lifting their skirts. Exposing their nakedness. Demonstrating before the whole world their powerlessness? Why does He go as far as to throw excrement at them and make them a spectacle? Because God is a jealous God. Jealous for His honor. Jealous for His glory. Jealous for His name.

The nation of Assyria has enjoyed their time in the sun. Their chariots have rolled all over the Middle East like an ancient blitzkrieg. Their empire is great. Their power limitless. Their military without equal. But they've grown proud. They've exceeded the limits God set for them. They've become drunk with their success. Though they served as the rod of God's anger against the northern kingdom of Israel, He must now bring them to heel. He must again demonstrate His sovereignty over all the nations of the earth. Remember the words of the Assyrian commander to King Hezekiah when they besieged Jerusalem? How they dared to compare Almighty God with the small tribal gods of the pagan nations? It's worth going back and re-reading the story from 2 Kings 18 again. Such disdain and disrespect draws God's ire. Not because it hurts His ego but because it offends His sacred and holy honor. God will not be mocked! The Creator will not allow His creatures to treat Him this way. They will learn to honor God. They will learn to respect God. They will learn to submit to God. He will bring them to their knees one way or the other because there is one thing God cares about more than the creatures He made in His own image and that is Himself. His glory. His honor. His fame. It is His will to make His name will be great upon the earth!

"The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither; the bloom of Lebanon withers. The mountains quake before him; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it. Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him." (Nahum 1:2-6) Assyria will learn this lesson in spades. As will the other nations who dare defy the Living God. But what about God's people? What is our response to this God? How should we approach this God? With fear and trembling? On some level, yes. With humility and submission? Certainly. With terror and dread? Absolutely not! Why? Because our God is also good. And He loves His people. He is faithful to His people. "The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him." (Nahum 1:7)

So here's the million dollar question from today's reading…are you living a life of humble submission before the Lord? Is God an ever-present reality in your life or does He seem distant? Someone to call on in case of emergency? Do you seek to love God with all your heart or are you apathetic towards His commandments? What about His honor and glory? Do these things cross your mind when you work? When you parent? When you're among friends? When you relate to your husband or wife? Is your worship focused on praising God or are you more concerned with your personal preferences? These are critical questions, friends, in light of what Nahum shares with us today.

Readings for tomorrow: Zephaniah 1-3

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August 5, 2022

God's Vision for the Nations

Readings for today: Zephaniah 1-3

I was asked recently what I loved most about God. Not an easy question to answer! There is so much I love about God but if I had to choose perhaps what I love most is His heart for the nations. God loves humanity. God loves every human being who has ever been conceived on the face of the earth. God loves every tribe and tongue and nation. God loves every culture and language and ethnicity. God loves every people group. God loves young and old. Rich and poor. Abled and disabled. And His great desire is to get to know each and every one on a deep, intimate, personal level.

So often when we think of the Great Commission, we think of Matthew 28. But did you know there is a Great Commission in every single gospel? Did you know the Great Commission often shows up in the Old Testament as well? Consider the words of Zephaniah from today's reading…"For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord." (Zephaniah 3:9) I imagine the people listening would have immediately thought back to the Tower of Babel. The place where God came down and confused the languages of the earth. The place where God judged the people of the earth for not fulfilling His Great Commission to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. Zephaniah points them forward to a day when God will reverse the curse. The people will come together in unity to call on the name of the Lord and serve Him with one accord. This is exactly what happens at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit is poured out and everyone hears the gospel preached in their own languages. The early church called on the name of the Lord and were saved. They served God with one accord, holding all things in common. They had great favor as a result with all the people and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

This is what God wants to do in and through His church today. So how does that happen? We open ourselves up to God. We surrender to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. We draw near to God in repentance and He then draws near to us. How will we know when He is near? Listen to how Zephaniah describes it…"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) Friends, these are the signs God has drawn near. Joy. Gladness. Peace. Love. Loud singing. Comfort for those who mourn. Freedom for the oppressed. Healing for the lame. Inclusion for the outcast. Reversal of reputation for those who've been put to shame for His name sake. God makes Himself known in the gathering of His people. God makes Himself known among all the peoples and all the nations of the earth. God makes Himself known in favor and blessing. How is God making Himself known to you in your life today?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 22-23, 2 Chronicles 34-35

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August 6, 2022

Life isn't Fair

Readings for today: 2 Kings 22-23, 2 Chronicles 34-35

"Whoever said life was fair?" If I only had a nickel for every time I heard that phrase growing up! As the oldest of three boys, I often complained that I had to do more work than my brothers. I had to be more responsible than my brothers. More was expected of me than my brothers. In reality, I don't actually think this was true but that's how it appeared to me when I was young. Then I had my own kids. Four of them. As they grew up, we started assigning them chores around the house. They too would complain from time to time. Guess what words came out of my mouth? "Whoever said life was fair?" :-)

One of the more difficult things about reading and reflecting on Scripture from a Western perspective is this principle of "fairness." We live in a democracy which - at least in theory - is built on the assumption that everyone has equal. Everyone has equal opportunity. Everyone gets the same chances in life. We all know this is a myth but that doesn't stop us from believing it and it becomes a "lens" through which we read Scripture. Fundamentally, we believe deep down in our hearts that God's law, God's grace, God's justice, God's mercy must apply equally to all people at all times. In essence, everyone gets a chance or God is unfair.

But then we read about King Josiah. A man so faithful to God that he's described as the greatest king since David. His heart was pure. He did not turn aside to the right or to the left. He walked in the ways of the Lord. He tore down the altars his father had built. He purged Israel of their idolatry. He reinstituted the Passover to such a degree that nothing like it had happened since the days of Samuel the prophet. Josiah rebuilt the Temple. He fulfilled the prophecy given to Jeroboam, destroying the shrines he had built that had ensnared the northern kingdom of Israel, leading to her destruction. One would think Josiah's faithfulness would stem the coming disaster. One would think God would judge him on his merits alone. One would think his faithfulness would be rewarded with long life and happiness and peace. Such was not the case.

Judah had reached the point of no return. God's judgment was on its way. There was no turning back. The sins of the fathers and grandfathers going back generations would now be visited on their descendents. Josiah's faithfulness didn't matter. It wasn't enough to turn back the tide. So Josiah goes to war and rather than rewarding his faithfulness with a great victory - as God had done in ages past - Josiah is mortally wounded and dies. His reign of faithfulness comes to a tragic end. The people wail. Their grief is real. The great prophet Jeremiah himself appears in our text, lifting up a lament. And to our eyes it appears God moved the goalposts. God is unfair. After all, did not Josiah do all God had asked? Did not Josiah stay true to God's commands? Did not Josiah walk in God's ways? Why did revival not come? Why didn't God give him a chance? Why didn't God restore Israel like he had done before?

Sin has consequences. Not just for our lives but for the lives of our children and children's children as well. There is a cumulative effect to sin. It builds over time. With each passing generation, injustices are heaped upon injustice. Death doesn't reset the deck. The passing of a generation doesn't restart the clock. The debt is passed on. The weight of sin only gets more heavy and eventually becomes a burden too great to bear. God is just. God is righteous. He will not let sin go unchecked. He will not let evil go unpunished. So by the time we get to Josiah, the die has been cast. God's wrath is already engaged. His judgment is on its way in the form of the Babylonian Empire. The line of David will be cut off. The

city of David destroyed. The Temple razed to the ground. God's people will go into exile. This is God's will and though it might not seem fair to our Western eyes, it is just and righteous.

At this point you may be thinking, "What hope do I have?" When will I feel the weight of God's righteous wrath and judgment? Should I be living in fear of the day when God's punishment will come and I will lose all that I have? Hear the good news of the gospel. Jesus Christ bore the full weight of human sin! All the sin that had piled up generation after generation - not just from our past but also from our future - was laid on his shoulders. On the cross, the Father poured out the full measure of His righteous wrath and judgment on the Son. Jesus truly paid it all. His blood satisfied the just demands of God's Law. Jesus was cut off. Jesus' body was destroyed. His soul went into exile in hell. But the Righteous One would not stay in the grave! On the third day, He rose again! And through His death and resurrection we have been set free. This was God's plan from eternity. To balance the scales of justice. To right every wrong. To level the playing field by sending His Only Beloved Son to die in our place. Rejoice, friends, God has done for you what you could not do for yourself! He has paid the penalty for your sin and granted you salvation!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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August 8, 2022

How Long, O Lord?

Readings for today: Habakkuk 1-3

It's the heart cry of God's people. Ever since the Fall of Adam and Eve, we've been crying out to God. How long will you wait? How long will you tarry? How long until sin and evil and death are finally and completely destroyed? We look around us and we see the wicked prosper. We see evil flourish. We see those who commit violence and injustice and oppression get ahead. We don't understand. Why do bad things happen to good people? How can a good God allow such evil and suffering? Why doesn't God do something about all that is wrong in the world?

The thing I love most about the Bible is it doesn't shy away from these hard, honest questions. The prophet Habakkuk asks some of these same questions in our passage today. "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted." (Habakkuk 1:2-4) Remember, Habakkuk is prophesying sometime after the death of Josiah. He has witnessed one of the most righteous kings in Israel's history die at the hands of a pagan king. He can't wrap his mind around how God could ever allow such a thing. Josiah did everything God asked. Josiah was righteous and good and noble and true. His death was the final blow for God's people. The wages of sin are now beginning to be paid. Destruction and violence and strife and contention are all on the rise while God seems to stand idly by. The Law is paralyzed. It cannot save. Justice is stymied. It never goes forth. The wicked surround the righteous. There can be no hope.

How does God respond? He's honest with His beloved prophet. "Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own. They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves." (Habakkuk 1:5-7) God is using the Babylonians to accomplish His divine purposes. He raises them up in order to bring the nations low. Like the Assyrians before them, they will become the rod of God's righteous judgment on His people. Habakkuk cannot believe what he hears. "Are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?…Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever?" (Habakkuk 1:12-13, 17) Habakkuk is full of fear for his people. He can see how merciless the Babylonian horde will be. The violence will not stop. The killing will not end. The suffering will be overwhelming.

Once again, the Lord answers. "And the Lord answered me: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay. Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith…For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea…But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him." (Habakkuk 2:2-4, 14, 20) God does not count time as we do. His vision is pure. His timing is perfect. He is on the move. If His salvation seems slow, we are to wait. If His deliverance seems delayed, we are to have faith. Indeed, the righteous shall live by faith. Just as

Abraham waited for the fulfillment of God's promise so must we and the good news is that God meets us in the waiting. He speaks to us in the waiting. He ministers to us in the waiting if we will but turn to Him. What is God waiting for, you might ask? He is waiting for His purpose to be fulfilled. And what is His purpose? To fill the earth with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. To call the earth to silence and awe and reverence and worship before Him as He indwells His holy Temple.

Habakkuk hears God's heart in these words and his despair turns to faith. "O Lord, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O Lord, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy…Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places." (Habakkuk 3:2, 17-19) Habakkuk walks by faith not by sight. He may not live to see the deliverance of the Lord but he believes it. Trusts it. Rejoices in it. This is our call as well. No matter where you may find yourself in life. No matter the challenges you may face. No matter the hardship you may endure. God is already on His way to save. Already on His way to deliver. Already on His way to lift you out of the pit and miry clay and give you a new song to sing. Trust Him! Believe Him! Have faith in Him! Rejoice in your coming salvation!

Readings for tomorrow: Joel 1-3

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August 9, 2022

Faith over Fear

Readings for today: Joel 1-3

This morning a good friend of mine shared with me his anxiety over the world his children are growing up in. He told me he and his wife watched the news for the first time the other day and were simply overwhelmed by what they saw. Violence. Disease. Pain. Suffering. It made him sick to his stomach. He asked me if I thought it was God's judgment and if we should be afraid. It's an honest question. I told him I have some of the same concerns and anxieties and fears. I look around the world today and see everything that's happening and I grieve. I made a commitment this year to read both the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal on a daily basis and often feel like I'm on information overload. Very little of it is good.

I think the prophet Joel must have felt the same. "What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten. What the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten." (Joel 1:4) Plague after plague. Defeat after defeat. The national economy crashed. An entire way of life destroyed. It had to be so depressing for him and yet what was his response? A call to faith over fear. "Consecrate a fast; call a worship 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 1:14) Joel is on to something important here. Any time we experience anxiety and fear, we have a choice to make. We can wallow in it. We can try to medicate it. We can attempt to dismiss it or ignore it. Or we can respond by taking it to God. Falling on our faces before Him. Humbling ourselves and crying out to Him for help.

After all, has not the Lord showed us His mercy? Is not our God a God of compassion? Forgiving those who love Him to the thousandth generation? Joel places his faith in God and God responds - as He always does - by renewing His covenant promise. "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." (Joel 2:12-13) God is jealous for His people. God loves the place where He has set His name. So even in times of national disaster, we look to the Lord. "Fear not, O land; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things!" God has done great things for His people throughout history and He will continue to do great things in and through them if they will but turn to Him.

One of my favorite Scriptures in the entire Bible comes from Joel 2:25, "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." I have experienced this restoration firsthand. Thirteen years ago, my life was in shambles. Neglect had almost cost me my marriage. Anger had almost cost me my children. Mistakes made by me and others had blown up my career. I was out of options. In desperation I turned to the Lord. For months, I spent my nights pacing back and forth for hours in prayer. I barely got any sleep. The darkness in my life only seemed to get deeper. My anxieties and fears paralyzed me. I hit rock bottom. The "locusts" God had sent into my life stripped me down to the studs. And who did I find waiting there for me? Jesus. He walked with me in the ruins of my life. He ministered to my wounds. He calmed my fears. He slowly but surely restored me to health again. The last thirteen years have been like a dream. All because I returned to the Lord with all my heart.

Perhaps you feel a lot like my friend. Perhaps you look at the news or what's happening in the world and you have deep concerns. Anxieties and fears for those you love. You wonder where to find hope. Return to God! Humble yourself before Him. Fast and pray. Rend your heart and give the Lord your whole heart. Let Him renew and restore you as He has promised.

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August 10, 2022

Godly Courage

Readings for today: Jeremiah 1-4

We've been preaching through a challenging series this summer at the church I serve. It's called "No Easy Answers" and we've been attempting to apply Biblical truth to some of the most complex issues of our day. Issues like truth, life, ethnicity, immigration, refugees, politics, marriage, family, and sexuality. It's been difficult to say the least. We've received nasty emails. Some people have left our church. Some remain and foster all sorts of division. I've been accused of being both "woke" and a "bigot." Some weeks I get called a "leftist progressive" and other weeks a "far right conservative." Some of the criticism has turned to personal attack. Some of it has spilled over onto my own family. On the positive side, I have had many, many more people complement us on our courage. We've had many new people start attending who have expressed thanks for being a church willing to take on hard subjects. Just this past week, a young woman who's been struggling in her faith for years made the decision to return because of how we were "holding space" for those with doubts and questions. It was so encouraging to hear her story.

Jeremiah was a man called to preach in one of the most difficult seasons in Israel's history. He was watching the end of an era. The twilight of a nation. His people had abandoned their faith. They no longer trusted in God or obeyed His Word. They ignored His Law and God's judgment was on the way. Their hearts were hard. Their eyes were blind. Their ears could no longer hear. And yet Jeremiah was called to preach. It took great courage. It took great perseverance. He would be mocked, beaten, and persecuted. People would seek his death. I've often wondered where he found the strength. Then I read these words from the opening chapter, "Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord." Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." (Jeremiah 1:4-10) Jeremiah's confidence comes from the Lord. He trusts the call God has placed on his life. It's an inner strength he was born with. Something God instilled in him in the womb. To abandon this call would be to abandon himself which is something Jeremiah simply cannot do.

I have to admit I feel much the same way. I actually don't feel like it takes much courage to preach what I preach. I simply say what God has called me to say. Frankly, I think it would take more courage to keep my mouth shut. To not preach God's Word. To substitute something more popular, less threatening, or to play to the crowd. Such an idea scares me to death because I know the Lord will hold me accountable for the way I lead His people. "But you, dress yourself for work; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them." (Jeremiah 1:17) Ultimately, however, it is not fear that drives me but love. I long for God's people to return to Him with all their hearts. I long for God's people to listen to His Word and obey His commands. I long for them to know the blessing of God in their lives. This is my heart and I know it's God's heart as well. "And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding." (Jeremiah 3:15) This is my calling. To be a faithful shepherd. A shepherd who loves God so much, he is willing to endure whatever conflict may come. I want to be a shepherd who feeds God's sheep with knowledge and understanding. Wisdom that is not of this world. This is my calling. This is my prayer. This is my hope. May the Lord find me faithful.

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August 11, 2022

The Grief of God

Readings for today: Jeremiah 5-8

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

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

This brings us back to Jeremiah 8. Here God is expressing the deepest, most heartbreaking grief possible. "My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick within me." God is experiencing an incredible sense of loss. His people have betrayed Him. They have abandoned Him. Then they turn around and blame Him. "Behold, the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and breadth of the land: "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?" They refuse to bow the knee. Refuse to repent and return to Him. Refuse to humble themselves before Him. Quite the opposite. They brazenly continue in sin. "Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols?" This is a stiff-necked people. A foolish people. A rebellious people. They take their relationship with God for granted. They are entitled. They are spoiled. They assume God will come to their rescue despite their unwillingness to walk in His ways. "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved."

The perspective shifts back to God. "For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded; I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored? Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" (Here we bleed into the beginning of chapter nine…) Again, one pictures deep, heavy sobs. God weeping a flood of tears. God experiencing unimaginable pain. Because He has freely joined Himself in an unbreakable covenant with His people, their wounds become His wounds. Their pain becomes His pain. Their heartbreak becomes His heartbreak. Things get so bad, God wishes He could leave. Abandon them to their fate. Leave the Temple in Jerusalem and return to the wilderness. Go back to the time when He tabernacled with them on the Exodus journey. "Oh that I had in the desert a travelers' lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them! For they are all adulterers, a company of treacherous men. They bend their tongue like a bow; falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, declares the

Lord.” But the Tabernacle is gone. There is no lodging place in the desert for God to run. He is stuck. He is committed. He will endure. This is the great faithfulness of our God! It is costly. It is hard. It is painful. But it remains true.

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

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August 12, 2022

True Greatness

Readings for today: Jeremiah 9-12

I grew up with a deep sense of insecurity. I always felt like I had something to prove. Always felt like I needed to impress others. I cared a lot about what others thought. An unkind word would send me into an emotional tailspin for days. Sure, I covered well. I developed an instinct for self-preservation. I guarded my heart and let no one in. I overcompensated by chasing achievement. I drove myself hard. I refused to ever quit. Though I was never the smartest, I graduated high school with honors. Those I was never the most athletic, I lettered in two sports and made the all-state team in lacrosse. Those I was not excited about Boy Scouts, I achieved the rank of Eagle. Though I wasn't sure what I believed, I was a leader in my youth group at church, sang solos in the church choir, and even played the lead (Jesus) in a production of Godspell. By the time I got to college, I was tired. Tired of having to keep up appearances. Tired of having to pretend every single day. Tired of having to project a perfect image to the world. Furthermore, I had no close friends. No community to speak of. My family was an hour away. I felt very much alone. The results were not good. The house of cards I had built came crashing down around me. I began drinking heavily. Skipping class. Failing out of school. That's when I met Jesus. He overwhelmed all my defenses. He penetrated to the depths of my heart. And He let me know I was deeply and dearly loved. Loved for who I was not who I pretended to be. Loved fully and completely and unconditionally. To say it was life-changing would be an understatement.

I love this verse from our reading today…"Thus says the Lord: Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord."(Jeremiah 9:23-24) It describes the old Doug and the new Doug so well. I used to be the guy who would boast in his wisdom. Boast in his strength. Boast in his success. But I knew deep down I was just covering for my insecurity. After meeting Jesus, I learned to boast only in Him. He became my security. He became my wisdom. He became my strength. Serving Him became my success. Learning to practice steadfast love and justice and righteousness in the earth became the goal of my life. After almost thirty years, I can say with confidence that my life is richer and more full that I could ever have imagined. I am wiser and stronger than I've ever been. I've experienced far more success than I ever deserved or could have achieved on my own. All because of Jesus.

It's so tempting to boast in the things of this world. To get caught up trying to keep up with those around us. Compare ourselves to other people's highlight reels on social media. Cover for our insecurities by chasing temporal wisdom, riches, success, or power. It's so easy to spend our lives trying to find something…anything…to boast in. To base our self-esteem on our own abilities and accomplishments. But God wants so much more for us. God has so much more for us. If we will simply turn to Him and let Him in, He will do more than we can ever ask or imagine.

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August 13, 2022

A Prophet's Pain

Readings for today: Jeremiah 13-16

The prophetic burden is a terrible one. It comes with incredible pain and suffering. It is accompanied by conflict and persecution. It is not a call that brings glory or honor, riches or wealth. It is a costly burden. It will sap one's mental, emotional, and physical strength. It will leave one often feeling weak and helpless. I have met many such prophets in my life. They are serving in some of the darkest places on the face of the earth. Their bodies bear the scars of their work. No one will ever know their name. They are desperately poor. They often go hungry and thirsty. They weep frequently. They feel so alone. They are beaten. They are threatened. They are often left for dead. And yet, they never stop preaching. Never stop speaking God's truth to those around them. They remind me of Jeremiah.

"O Lord, you know; remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. In your forbearance take me not away; know that for your sake I bear reproach. Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts. I did not sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?" (Jeremiah 15:15-18)

I love the raw honesty of Jeremiah. He never sugarcoats his life. He never pretends his call is easy or fulfilling or fun. He is hurting. He is in pain. He suffers tremendously. He is attacked on every side. He has no friends to speak of. No one to share his burden. He sits alone. When he does open his mouth, he is "a man of strife and contention" to His people. They curse him when they see him. They hate what he has to say. They refuse to believe him. When Jeremiah first accepted God's call, he rejoiced. God's Word became his joy. It was an honor to be called by God's name. But his joy has turned to sorrow. His rejoicing has turned to mourning. Honor has turned to shame. For the Lord's sake, Jeremiah bears reproach. He is hated and despised. God has filled him with indignation. Honestly, it feels to Jeremiah like he got a raw deal.

Though I would never claim the prophet's mantle, I have tasted a bit of Jeremiah's pain. I have felt the indignation Jeremiah references when I have felt compelled to preach God's truth and confront the idolatry of God's people. I have been cursed for preaching on ethnic reconciliation. I have been criticized harshly for confronting things like preference-driven worship, greedy and power-hungry preachers, or unhealthy and toxic congregational systems. I have taken some shots over the years for my biblical views on sexuality and marriage. I have been attacked for the fact that I am pro-life from the womb to the tomb. I have to admit in my darker moments I too wonder if I got a raw deal. But then the Lord encourages me just as He encouraged Jeremiah.

"Therefore thus says the Lord: If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before Me. If you utter what is precious and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. They shall turn to you but you shall not turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 15:19-20) God is faithful. If we take our stand on His Word, we will never be defeated or put to shame. If we walk in His ways, He promises to be with us and save us and deliver us. He will guide us and protect us. He will strengthen us and equip us for every task He sets before us. This call is not just for preachers like me. Not just for prophets like Jeremiah or my friends overseas. It is for every Christian. Every person who calls on the name of the Lord. So stand before the Lord, friends! Utter what is precious and good and righteous and true. Trust Him for your deliverance and salvation. He will stand by your side!

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August 15, 2022

Logical Consequences

Readings for today: Jeremiah 17-20

One of the images Jesus refers to the most when describing the character and nature of God is that of a Father. Jesus calls Him "Abba." (Mark 14:36) When teaching His disciples how to pray, He encourages them to begin, "Our Father who art in heaven…" (Matthew 6:9) When describing God to His disciples, Jesus calls him a "good father who knows how to give good gifts to His children." (Matthew 7:11) He tells them their Heavenly Father delights in them and it is His pleasure to give them the Kingdom. (Luke 12:32) When Jesus Himself is suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane, He prays, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me…" (Matthew 26:39) And when He hangs in agony on the Cross, it is to His Father that He appeals for our forgiveness. (Luke 23:34)

God is a faithful Father. As such, He knows what is best for His children. He knows what it takes for them to flourish and thrive. He knows how to give them good gifts and bless them. But He also knows how to discipline them. He knows when to step back and let them face the consequences of the choices they have made. He knows that sometimes children need to experience the "curse" of a life lived apart from God. Think of the story of the prodigal son from Luke 15 and how the Father in that story allows His son to take his inheritance and squander it. The Father in that parable never stops loving His son. Never stops waiting up for His son. Never stops hoping and longing for the day when His son will return. But He also never rescues His son. He never enables His son. He knows His son has to make His own choice to reject the "curse" and return for the "blessing."

Listen to how Jeremiah describes this dynamic in Jeremiah 17:5-6, "Thus says the Lord: Cursed is the one who trusts in themselves and trusts in their strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. She shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land…" (see pic below from the Judean wilderness)

Contrast this with Jeremiah 17:7-8, “Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is in the Lord. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and it is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.” (See pic below from Jericho which is one of the largest desert oases in the world)

Again, God is a faithful Father. He honors the choices of His children and allows them to face the consequences of their decisions. When we turn away from God and reject His will for our lives, we should not be surprised when we end up in desert places. Places where life is hard and sustenance is scarce and death is an ever-present companion. When we find ourselves in these places, it’s not so much that God has cursed us as much as we have cursed ourselves. The same is true with blessing. If we will turn to God and walk in His ways, we will find ourselves flourishing like an oasis in the desert. Bearing fruit throughout all the different seasons of life. Tapped into springs of living water that never cease to flow. Friends, this is your Father’s heart for you today. Turn to Him and receive the blessings He has stored up for those He loves.

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August 16, 2022

The Battle for the Heart

Readings for today: Jeremiah 21-24

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

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

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

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

Jesus is our righteousness, friends. God made Him who knew no sin to actually become sin on our behalf. To bear the full weight of the world's sin. Past. Present. Future. He took all my sin. All my

brokenness. All my fears. He took all my rebellion. All my rejection. All my disdain. He took all my selfishness. All my greed. All my lusts. And He nailed them to the cross. By His wounds, I am healed. By His brokenness, I am made whole. By His chains, I am set free. By His death, I am given new life.

As I reflect deeper on the passage above, I realize God is indeed at war with me. His Spirit is waging a battle even now for my heart. He has invaded my life. Invaded the innermost depths of my being in order to cleanse me. Purify me. Refine me. He is a consuming fire. He will not rest until my life reflects His glory. And the more I surrender. The more I submit. The more I cooperate with the work of the Spirit, the more I will experience the freedom Christ promises. This is no easy task. The flesh and its desires must be crucified. Put to death. There can be no safe harbor for them in our souls. We must allow the Spirit to "save to the uttermost." We must open ourselves up fully and completely to His work. Only then will we be truly set free.

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August 17, 2022

The Patience of God

Readings for today: Jeremiah 25-28

We talk about it all the time in my home…the school of hard knocks. Reality being the best and most effective teacher. As each of my children has grown up, we have done our best to teach them and instruct them in the ways of the Lord. We've done our best to help them understand the consequences - good or bad - of the choices they make. We've done our best to come alongside them when they stumble and fall. But at the end of the day, each of them in their own way has had to figure some things out on their own. They've had to come face to face with reality and learn that the world is not very accommodating. When I take a step back, it's a fascinating process to watch unfold. I've gone from being the smartest person they know when they are young to the dumbest person they know when they are teenagers back to pretty smart again when they get into their early twenties. Through it all, my wife and I've learned to be patient. To wait on the Lord. To wait on our children. To let them go through hard experiences and learn difficult lessons so that they will be better for it in the long run. Does it mean crying a lot of tears? Yes. Does it mean dealing with the anxieties and fears that come with parenting? Absolutely. Is it hard to watch your children go through suffering? Without a doubt. It continually keeps us on our knees before the Lord, hoping our children will relent and see the light and return to Him. Thankfully, all of them are on that journey and because we've loved them well, we get to be part of it.

Now step back and try to put yourself in God's position. For generations, He has been reaching out to His people. He has sent them prophets and preachers. He has performed miracle after miracle. He has given them His Word and provided for them a Land. He has done all these things out of love but they have rejected Him. "You have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear, although the Lord persistently sent to you all His servants the prophets saying, Turn now, every one of you, from his evil way and evil deeds, and dwell upon the land that the Lord has given to you and your fathers from of old and forever. Do not go after other gods to serve and worship them or provoke me to anger with the work of your hands. Then I will do you no harm. Yet you have not listened to Me, declares the Lord, that you might provoke me to anger with the work of your hands to your own harm." (Jeremiah 25:4-7) The natural consequence of the people's rejection of God is judgment. God will send Babylon against His people and all the surrounding nations. None shall escape. The whole land will become a ruin and a waste. And lest we think God is being too harsh here, God makes it clear that His judgment is righteous and just and good. "I will recompense them according to their deeds and the work of their hands." (Jeremiah 25:14)

Human beings have never truly grasped the depths of their sin. We have never truly understood the depths of our depravity. We were given authority and dominion by God at the beginning but we have made a complete mess of things. We want to be like God but we reign like a tyrant over a world that is suffering and tormented. We are selfish and greedy. We treat the earth like a disposable resource. We dismiss or ignore or disdain other human beings made in the image of God simply because they look different or act different or speak different or spend money different or vote different. And still God loves us. Still God reaches out to us. Still God is patient with us. "Thus says the Lord: Stand in the court of the Lord's house and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the Lord all the words that I command you to speak to them; do not hold back a word. It may be they will listen and every one turn from his evil way that I may relent of the disaster that I intend to do to them because of their evil deeds." (Jeremiah 26:2-3) God longs for us to return to Him. He longs for us to return to His ways. He longs for us to return to His love. Today is yet another opportunity to turn back to Him. Why delay any longer? Why keep holding out? Why keep running from Him? The God who loves you so much is patiently waiting for you to come home.

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August 18, 2022

God's Plan

Readings for today: Jeremiah 29-32

Jeremiah 29 is a chapter embedded in a much larger story. A tragic story. The story of Israel's exile. They have lost their home. They have been forcibly removed. Their leaders have been tortured and put to death. All of their cultural icons - including the Temple of God itself - have been razed to the ground. In short, their collective identity as the people of God suffered a massive hit, leaving behind an emotional and spiritual crater that will not be easily filled. Especially not as they rebuild in a foreign land.

Think about the collective shock we've felt during the COVID pandemic. Public health models predicting millions of deaths. Hospitals filling up. Cities on lockdown. A robust economy crashing to a halt. As weeks turned to months, frustration reached a boiling point. Then George Floyd was killed. Thousands of protesters filled the streets. Peace gave way to violence as the sun set in many of our cities. Looting. Rioting. Burning. Then came election season. A bare-knuckle affair that left a nation more divided than ever. Then came January 6th and the fallout. At times, it has felt like our society was on the verge of collapse. But as bad as the last several months have been, it could have been much, much worse. Imagine groups like Antifa or the Proud Boys or some other extremist group having their way? Imagine anarchy breaking loose not just in a small autonomous zone in Seattle but across the country. Imagine all the hateful, violent rhetoric becoming reality. Imagine an enemy invading the United States like Ukraine. Imagine our political and social leaders imprisoned, tortured, and killed. Imagine the systematic destruction of every monument we've ever built. Washington, Lincoln, and Jefferson memorials all destroyed. Arlington, the US Capitol, and the White House all burned to the ground. Imagine these invaders attempting to erase "America" from the face of the earth. This is what the Israelites experienced and as they begin to settle into captivity…into slavery…into their new lives as strangers and foreigners in a new land, they receive the strangest letter from Jeremiah.

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

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

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

It is only AFTER all these difficult things have been said that Jeremiah pens the words we love to quote so much, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.

You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile." (Jeremiah 29:11-14)

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

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 33-37

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August 19, 2022

God's Word

Readings for today: Jeremiah 33-37

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 38-40, Psalms 74, 79

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August 20, 2022

Entitlement

Readings for today: Jeremiah 38-40, Psalms 74, 79

Have you ever been disappointed with God? Ever feel like He let you down? Ever wonder how His plans for you could be good when so many bad things are taking place? I imagine that's how King Zedekiah felt in today's reading. He hoped against all hope for an 11th hour rescue. He simply could not believe God would abandon His people. Abandon His city. Abandon His Temple. He fundamentally could not bring himself to believe things had gotten that bad. He knew his history. He could look back and tell you story after story about God relenting from disaster at the last possible moment. But then he watches in horror as the Babylonians storm a breach in the wall. He tries to escape only to be captured and forced to watch as his sons are executed in front of him. It is the last thing he will ever see as his eyes are the next thing to go. He is then shackled in chains and carried off into exile. It's a tragic ending to a tragic story.

But we've seen this before, have we not? After Adam's fall, God raises up Seth only to watch as humanity descends into chaos. He raises up Noah and rescues him from the flood only to watch Noah's descendants rebel and build a tower to the heavens. He scatters them and raises up Abraham only to watch his descendants end up in slavery in Egypt. God raises up Moses and delivers them from bondage. Brings them to a land flowing with milk and honey only to watch them forget Him and do what is right in their own eyes. So he raises up David. The man after God's own heart and sets him on the throne. But now David's descendants have followed the same path and ended up in the same place as those who've come before. In each case, I am confident the people of God believed God would never leave them or forsake them. I am confident they believed God would remain steadfast, loyal, and true. And I imagine they were incredibly disappointed when judgment came.

The reality is our disappointment with God is often grounded in entitlement. We make the mistake of taking God's grace for granted. We presume on the unconditional nature of His love. We fail to acknowledge the seriousness of our sin and refuse to take responsibilty for the selfish choices we make. Bonhoeffer called this "cheap grace." Grace without cost. Love without sacrifice. Relationship without rules. Unfettered freedom which isn't really freedom at all. This is what Zedekiah believed that led to his destruction. This is what Israel believed that led to their destruction. And this is what far too many of us believe if we're honest.

Friends, we cannot blame God for the consequences of our sinful choices. We cannot blame God for our rebellion. He has warned us over and over again what will happen should we choose to reject His ways. We cannot claim to love God and not follow His commands. The two always go together. Yes, we are saved by grace. Yes, Jesus loves us with an everlasting, unconditional love. Yes, God's forgiveness is always within reach. But only for those who repent. Only for those who confess. Only for those who acknowledge their sin and actively seek to turn from their self-centered ways. This is the truth of the gospel! Grace and law hang together. Only those who believe obey and only those who obey believe or, as the old hymn put it, "Trust and obey for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus."

Readings for tomorrow: None

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August 22, 2022

Sabbath

Readings for today: 2 Kings 24-25, 2 Chronicles 36:1-21, Jeremiah 52

Today's reading includes this fascinating line from 2 Chronicles 36:20-21, "Nebuchadnezzar took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years." Most scholars believe the books of the Kings and the books of the Chronicles are written by two different authors with two different perspectives. Both agree that the reason Judah was now going into exile was due to the sins of the kings. Both agree that Nebuchadnezzar is an agent God has raised up to execute His righteous judgment. However, the Chronicler goes into further detail as to why judgment has come. Not only did the kings refuse to humble themselves before the prophet Jeremiah and obey the Word of the Lord, they ignored the Sabbath. They broke the fourth commandment. They refused to give the land its rest. According to Leviticus 25:3-4, "For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather its fruits, but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord. You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard." Sabbath rest for the land was part of a healthy agricultural cycle God hardwired into creation. It also served as a reminder to the people of God of their dependence on Him. In the Sabbath year when the land is at rest, they would have to trust God to produce what they needed. Furthermore, it reset humanity's relationship with the earth. It reminds us of the calling God placed on our lives at creation - to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and exercise dominion as stewards over all God has made. The earth is not a possession to exploit or abuse but something to nurture and cherish.

Our world would do well to recover the idea of Sabbath and God's people should be the first to show them the way. Beginning in the way we lead our lives, we take one day out of every seven to rest from our labors. We worship. We rest. We sleep. We disconnect from technology. We enjoy time with those we love. We engage in those activities that bring us joy. Second, we seek to create Sabbath opportunities for those around us. If we are employers, we give our employees generous time off. We create space for them to worship and rest and recharge. We give our business a rest as well. We refuse to bow the knee to the relentless pressure to turn a profit. We refuse to believe the lie that "time is money." This is what drives a company like Chick fil-A to remain closed on Sundays. Third, we create Sabbath for the world we inhabit. If we are engaged in agriculture, we practice crop rotations and other such things that give the land a rest and allow it recharge. If we are energy producers, we seek to minimize our environmental impact, expand into renewables, and do all we can to steward our resources well. If we are architects and engineers, we try to build with the land rather than against it. Rather than engage in a running war with the earth, we seek to build our communities in partnership with it. If are government leaders, we incentivize new technologies that leave less of a mark on the planet and regulate business in order to eliminate abuses like overfishing, strip mining, or slash and burn farming techniques. All of these examples are not just good social policy but actually have biblical warrant in the foundational principle of Sabbath.

Practicing Sabbath is revolutionary. It's also deeply Biblical. God ordained the Sabbath when He chose to rest on the seventh day of creation. God set up all of life and all of creation to operate according to a divine rhythm. Mornings and evenings. Springtime and harvest. Six days to labor and one day to rest. Six years to plant and prune and one year to lie fallow. We ignore these rhythms to our peril. Those who refuse to take one day out of seven to rest find themselves anxious and stressed and unhealthy.

Human beings simply were not meant to run 24/7. Employers who drive their employees relentlessly without giving them a break will find themselves with high turnover and lower quality products. Communities that ignore the contours of the land on which they are built will find themselves at greater risk of floods, earthquakes, and other natural disasters. These are the consequences of ignoring Sabbath and we see the examples all around us.

So what are we to do? What's the first step towards change? It begins with each one of us making a conscious, intentional decision to set one day in seven apart for worship and rest before the Lord. Creatively finding ways to disconnect from email and social media, putting work aside, and getting outside to enjoy all God has made. What does Sabbath look like in your life today?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 41-44

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August 23, 2022

Fear or Faith?

Readings for today: Jeremiah 41-44

One of the things I get to do in my line of work is help churches that find themselves in crisis. Leadership failings. Trust issues. Organizational chaos. There are lots of reasons churches struggle and when it gets to a certain point, they cry out for help. That's often when I am called to go in. We begin working with the pastors. Working with the elders. Working with the leaders. And the biggest challenge we face in these situations is to help people who are often hurting, angry, fearful, and afraid walk by faith.

Jeremiah faced the same challenge. The national crisis of God's people deepens with the murder of the Babylonian governor. The people of God come to Jeremiah and ask him to pray on their behalf. What should they do? How should they respond? They are naturally afraid of the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar. Will he return and utterly destroy them? Will he seek retribution for the murder of his official? What's going to happen? Jeremiah seeks the Lord on their behalf and the Lord graciously answers. "If you will remain in this land, then I will build you up and not pull you down; I will plant you, and not pluck you up; for I relent of the disaster that I did to you. Do not fear the king of Babylon, of whom you are afraid. Do not fear him, declares the Lord, for I am with you, to save you and to deliver you from his hand. I will grant you mercy, that he may have mercy on you and let you remain in your own land." (Jeremiah 42:10-12) What an amazing promise! Even now, after all their sin and rebellion, God is willing to forgive and show mercy and establish them in the Promised Land. Even now, God is willing to bless them and help them and come to their aid. Yes, it will require a step of faith. It will require them to be humble. Submit to Nebuchadnezzar once again. It will require faith as they wait to see how the Babylonians will respond. But if they will do these things, God will be with them.

Sadly, their fear gets the best of them. "Azariah the son of Hoshaiah and Johanan the son of Kareah and all the insolent men said to Jeremiah, "You are telling a lie. The Lord our God did not send you to say, 'Do not go to Egypt to live there,' but Baruch the son of Neriah has set you against us, to deliver us into the hand of the Chaldeans, that they may kill us or take us into exile in Babylon." (Jeremiah 43:2-3) They flee to Egypt. Back to the place where they were once enslaved. They begin to worship Egyptian gods. They leave the land of promise for a foreign land to serve foreign masters hoping they will protect them and keep them safe.

We walk by faith and not by sight. It's not easy. It often seems illogical to our human minds. Azariah and Johanan were doing what made sense. It makes sense to run for cover when you are afraid. It makes sense to run to Egypt, the world's only other superpower, to escape the wrath of the Babylonians. It makes sense to flee when you've just been conquered. It is natural to be afraid in such situations. But it is PRECISELY in these moments, when things are at their darkest and most bleak, that we turn to God in faith.

Many churches I've worked with over the years have sadly not been able to make this turn. They keep trying to handle things on their own. They keep turning to their own wisdom. They keep trying to operate according to their own strength. They falsely believe if they can just get another pastor. If they can just get rid of a certain leader. If they can just hit on the right program. Attract the right kind of people. Success will come. They turn to business principles. They go to conferences. They talk vision and values and policies and procedures. They try so hard and all the while God is in heaven reaching

out to them. Calling them to slow down. Simplify. Sit with Him in prayer. Rebuild trust by spending time together in the Word and just sharing life.

Thankfully, I've seen some wonderful successes along the way as well. Churches who finally come to the end of themselves and are ready to submit to God. Ready to walk by faith not by sight. Ready to look past attendance and budget and building issues and let God restore them. They are ready to put aside all the talk about vision and values and leadership and let the Spirit show them the way. They are ready to stop looking to organizational solutions for spiritual problems and instead rely on God. It's a beautiful thing to watch as God builds them back up. Replants the fields and brings in a harvest. Friends, if we trust God, He will come through!

Readings for tomorrow: Obadiah 1, Psalms 82-83

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August 24, 2022

Family Feud

Readings for today: Obadiah 1, Psalms 82-83

There's nothing worse than a family feud. Especially one that lasts generations. Two brothers grow up together. Polar opposites in personality, they never get along. One is favored by his father, the other by his mother. One loves hunting, camping, fishing, and the outdoors. The other prefers staying at home, reading, studying, enjoying the finer things of life. One is big and strong. A mountain of a man. The other is small and thin. He's the intellectual. One day, the big, strong older brother comes in from hunting and is famished. The younger brother has been cooking all day. The older brother asks for some food but the younger brother refuses him unless he gives up his birthright. The stage is set for the younger brother to usurp the older brother's place in the family. Many years pass. Their father is failing. It's time to divide up the inheritance. The younger brother steals the favored place in the family. The older brother is enraged. He seeks revenge. The younger brother leaves home. He's gone for years. When he finally comes home, he's prospered. In his absence, so has the older brother. They meet. They forgive. But their families remain separate. Their clans do not mingle. There is no indication they even see each other again.

Fast forward generations. Hundreds of years. Edom and Israel are now mortal enemies. Locked in perpetual conflict. What began with a bowl of porridge has become a tribal war. Seems crazy, doesn't it? And yet, it's not an uncommon story. Especially in "honor/shame" cultures where defending one's family reputation is taken very seriously. Through it all, God has been watching. Watching these two "brothers" fight. Watching their descendants go back and forth. Now judgment has come for Esau has gone too far. "Because of the violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever." (Obadiah 1:10) It's painful to read.

Family feuds are the worst. There's nothing worse than going to war with the people you love. Husbands. Wives. Mothers. Fathers. Children. Grandchildren. Brothers. Sisters. It's heartbreaking. It doesn't matter if the conflict is large or small, it's always painful. Working through it requires great courage and humility as we forgive, reconcile, and restore relationships. It's some of them hardest work we will ever do.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells a very famous story. Two brothers and a father. The younger brother comes and shames his father by asking him to give him his inheritance early. For some reason, he doesn't want to be part of the family anymore. The father graciously agrees. The older brother is horrified. His anger begins to smolder. The younger brother heads off on his own. He wastes everything he has on sinful living. Gossip and rumors filter back to the family of his experiences bringing more shame and more dishonor on the family's reputation. The older brother is enraged. He secretly begins wishing his younger brother would die. Meanwhile, the younger brother loses everything. Things are so bad, he takes on the most shameful profession there is for a Jew. Feeding pigs. He's starving. He's destitute. He has nothing left. Coming to the end of himself, he finally decides to return home. To face the family he once left. To ask for mercy and perhaps be taken on as a hired servant. On his way home, he rehearses what he will say when he finally sees his father. But while is far off...the Bible says...the father sees him! He's been waiting! Hoping! Praying for the day when his younger son would appear on the horizon! He runs to him. He embraces him. He gives him the family robe and signet ring. He welcomes him home with a feast. Meanwhile, the older brother's rage now erupts. He refuses to embrace his brother. Refuses to forgive. Refuses to reconcile. Refuses to welcome him back into the

family. And what does the father do? Runs to him as well. Embraces him. Assures him of his great love.

The parable ends with a cliffhanger. What will the older brother do? How will he respond? Will he follow his father's example and embrace his brother once again? Think about your own family. What relationships need reconciliation? Where does forgiveness need to be offered and received? What does restoration look like? Think about your own position in your family. Are you the prodigal son whose left home and damaged relationships? Are you the older brother whose anger and rage threaten the possibility of reconciliation? Are you the father who embraces both his sons with grace and love?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 45-48

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August 25, 2022

The Lord's Discipline

Readings for today: Jeremiah 45-48

The Lord disciplines those He loves. I remember when I first ran across those words from Hebrews 12:6. They resonated deeply. As Christians, we believe God is our Heavenly Father. We believe He is a Good Father who delights in giving good gifts to His children. We believe He is a Faithful Father who walks with us every step of the way throughout all of life. We believe He is a Wise Father who knows what's best for us. As such, it makes perfect sense that He would discipline me when I go astray. It makes perfect sense that He would say "No" when I ask for something outside of His will for my life. It makes perfect sense that He would lovingly but firmly correct me when I am engaged in sin.

God made a covenant with Israel after delivering them from bondage in Egypt. He promised to be their God. He promised to be faithful and true and steadfast and loyal to them. He promised to walk with them wherever they would go. He promised to be good to them and bless them and keep them. But God was also clear as to what would happen should Israel forsake the covenant and worship other gods. He would punish them. He would discipline them. He would lovingly but firmly correct them. Now His judgment may seem harsh in light of everything we have read. The pain and suffering they've endured has been immense. The devastation and destruction overwhelming. So many have lost their lives and lost loved ones as a result of all that has happened. This is loving discipline? No thanks! But take a moment and try to look at things from God's perspective. Recall to mind all the injustice and oppression and idolatry and violence and abuse of power that had taken place under the evil kings who ruled both the northern and southern kingdoms. Called to be the light, Israel had become a land of deep darkness. Called to be set apart, Israel had become just like her pagan neighbors. Called to be righteous and good, Israel had become corrupt and evil. It's hard to overstate the horror she had become so God brings forth His judgment.

God's goal in judgment is never the complete destruction of His people though they have rightfully earned such a fate. It is always to turn them back to Him. Even here at the end of Jeremiah after all has been lost and the nation scattered, the prophet sounds a note of hope. "Fear not, O Jacob my servant, declares the Lord, for I am with you. I will make a full end of all the nations to which I have driven you, but of you I will not make a full end. I will discipline you in just measure, and I will by no means leave you unpunished." (Jeremiah 46:28) Yes, the evil Israel has committed in God's name must be dealt with but God will never forsake the covenant He made with them. Yes, their sin must be atoned for but God will never abandon them to their fate. He will discipline them in just measure. He will punish them for their transgressions. But He will restore them as well and gather them from the nations to which they have been scattered.

Now consider your own life. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He still disciplines those He loves. He still corrects those who've gone astray. He still confronts us in our sin. But thankfully ALL of His wrath and judgment was poured out on Jesus at the Cross. All our sin was atoned for by Jesus' sacrificial death. God's justice has been perfectly satisfied in Christ. This is unbelievably good news! Because of what Jesus has accomplished for us, we receive mercy and forgiveness rather than judgment and punishment. God's discipline is kind and gentle even as it is firm and righteous. Yes, we will still experience the natural consequences of our sin but God is always faithful to welcome us back home.
Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 49-50

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August 26, 2022

Biblical Archeology

Readings for today: Jeremiah 49-50

I have stood on the mound in Rabbath-Ammon. I have seen the ruins of Edom. I have spoken to the descendants of Kedar. It's a powerful experience to see the Bible come to life. To connect the dots between what we read in Jeremiah today and real life events. The archeological "tel" in the modern day city of Amman, Jordan dates back to the Bronze Age (1800 BCE). Walking among the ruins, one can see evidence of the Romans, Byzantines, and Umayyads. As they have excavated certain portions, they found a tomb dating to the middle Bronze Age that held some pottery. They also found evidence of the ancient capital of the nation of Ammon. In fact, the oldest known inscription of the Ammonite language was discovered here. The museum that was built on site holds some of the oldest pieces artifacts ever unearthed. It's really something to behold.

The ruins of Edom are just as powerful. I took a tour of Wadi Rum and saw the places where ancient caravans would stop to rest and water their camels before continuing north. It's also the wilderness where Israel wandered after coming up out of the Red Sea. It's desolate. Empty. Dangerous. It's easy to see why Israel spent so much time complaining and longing for Egypt. There's simply nothing out there. Petra was a marvel, of course. Though not Edomite, it was a major city in the region built by the Nabateans. One also encounters the Bedouins in this region of the world. Descendants of nomadic tribes like the Kedarites referenced in today's reading. They largely maintain the same way of life their ancestors did.

What's my takeaway from the journey? How does it relate to today's reading? Jeremiah makes it clear that kingdoms come and go. Nations rise and fall. As powerful as one county may be at a particular moment, there is already another rising that will take it's place. This was true in the ancient world and it's just as true today. Only the Kingdom of God lasts forever. Only the Triune God reigns supreme. He has no rival. He has no equal. There are none who can match his power. I love how Psalm 2 puts it, "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." (Psalm 2:1-6)

As believers in Jesus Christ, we place our trust in the King of kings and Lord of lords. While we may love and serve our earthly kingdoms, we do not give them our final or ultimate allegiance. We know they will one day fall just as surely as Ammon and Edom and Damascus. We must learn from those who have gone before us and whose voices cry out to us from the ruins they left behind. They spent their lives building great civilizations and monuments only to watch them disappear into the sands of the desert. Will we do the same? Or will we spend our lives building for a different kind of kingdom? A kingdom that never ends?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 51, Psalms 137

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August 27, 2022

The Language of Suffering

Readings for today: Jeremiah 51, Psalms 137

One of the most important things to keep in mind as you read the Bible are the different genres of Scripture. It's not all directions and commands. There is history. There is poetry. There are wisdom sayings. There is storytelling. There are parables. All of it is God's Word. All of it is useful for teaching and correction and encouragement.

Today's reading from Psalm 137 is a gut-wrenching one. It is a song sung from the perspective of those recently exiled to Babylon. Force-marched over 900 miles, they arrive at the Euphrates. Held captive and enslaved, they have lost all hope. They had just witnessed the destruction of their entire way of life. They come to the waters of Babylon and they sit and they weep. Their cries fill the air. They shared their memories of better days when they walked the streets of Zion. They were so heartbroken, they longed to hang up their instruments and sing no more but their captors forced them. Adding insult to injury, they mocked them saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." Sing us one of the songs of deliverance. Tell us stories about the God who abandoned you in your hour of greatest need. It is an incredibly heartbreaking scene.

It reminds me of a book I once read titled, Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans. Scholars have uncovered a treasure trove of prayers going all the way back to the days of slavery and it is powerful to read them. To place oneself in their shoes and imagine their pain and suffering. To hear their hearts as they cry out to God for deliverance and healing and freedom. It is not a book you can read dispassionately. It brings tears to your eyes at times. The raw emotion is moving. It's also what informs so many of negro spirituals. Songs like Go Down Moses, Give Me Jesus, and Wade in the Water. Their music and prayers rose out of their pain and gives them an unmatched gravitas that moves hearts to this day.

Psalm 137 ends with a terrible request, "O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" (Psalms 137:8-9) It is horrifying and yet it is as honest and real as it gets. By including it in the canon of Scripture, God is not promising to answer such prayers as much as letting us know He listens to them. No matter how dark our prayers become. No matter how angry we get. Even if we lace our prayers with profanity and frustration. God hears them. God welcomes them. God is a big boy and can handle all we can throw at Him. He is not afraid to get down into the muck and mire. He's not afraid to dig through the manure pile that our lives can become. He is with us in the midst of the deepest heartaches and terrible tragedies. It doesn't matter whether we find ourselves in Jerusalem or Babylon. At home or in exile. Feeling blessed or cursed. God is there. We can talk to Him. We can share our deepest thoughts and emotions with Him. We don't need to be ashamed. We don't need to hide. He is our Father and He understands our fears.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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August 29, 2022

Lament

Readings for today: Lamentations 1:1-3:36

I have a friend named Dinesh. Dinesh is a Ugandan pastor who ministers in the northern part of his country. When he was a boy, he lived under the constant threat of terrorism. The Lord's Resistance Army under the leadership of Joseph Kony was very active in his region. He was trained by his family to run into the bush when he heard the jeeps and trucks roll into his village. He escaped several times over the years only to come back and find the bodies of his family members who had been killed. Eventually, those living in villages all over northern Uganda escaped to cities like Kitgum where Dinesh now lives. They found safety in numbers but they left their homes behind. They left their livelihoods behind. The cities were not set up to support all the refugees so many of them suffered from life-threatening poverty. It's been many years since Kony ravaged the region. The latest news has him hiding out in the Central African Republic, a shadow of his former self. Still, the people are afraid to go home. They believe their villages are cursed. The memories of death and destruction are too painful to face. It reminds me of Lamentations.

"My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out to the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because infants and babies faint in the streets of the city. They cry to their mothers, "Where is bread and wine?" as they faint like a wounded man in the streets of the city, as their life is poured out on their mothers' bosom…In the dust of the streets lie the young and the old; my young women and my young men have fallen by the sword; you have killed them in the day of your anger, slaughtering without pity." (Lamentations 2:11-12, 21) It's hard to believe this kind of thing still happens around the world. But it's more common than we realize. This fall I hope to travel to the northern regions of Ethiopia where a civil war has been raging for the last couple of years. We are hoping to launch over seventy new church planters into the area to bring the hope of the gospel to people who are experiencing unbelievable suffering. We will work alongside our indigenous leaders to empower them and equip them and resource them as they rebuild. But it will not be an easy task. The trauma is immense. The pain is very real. We will lament even as we labor to bring renewal and restoration.

It's not easy to read a book like Lamentations. It's not easy to enter another person's pain and suffering. It's not easy to hear them cry out. It's not easy to look at the world through their tear-filled eyes. It's not easy to sit with them in the ashes and dust of their lives and listen to them. And yet the Lord calls us to weep with those who weep. To mourn with those who mourn. To grieve with those who grieve. Jeremiah models this for us by putting these words to paper. Though he knows God is in the right, his heart breaks for God's people. He feels their pain intensely. Listen to just a few of the verses from Lamentations 3 again, "I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath; he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light…He has made my flesh and my skin waste away…he has broken my bones; he has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago…though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer…he turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces; he has made me desolate…He drove into my kidneys the arrows of his quiver…He has filled me with bitterness; he has sated me with wormwood…He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes; my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, "My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord." (Lamentations 3:1-2, 4, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15-18) All hope seems lost but Jeremiah continues to turn to the Lord. "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." The Lord is good

to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.” (Lamentations 3:21-26)

God is always faithful. Even in judgment, His desire is to bring mercy and forgiveness and grace. His love is steadfast, loyal, faithful, and true. It never wavers. It never ceases. It never fails. No matter where you may find yourself today, turn to the Lord! Make Him your portion! Make Him your hope! Make Him your sanctuary! No matter what pain or suffering you may endure, wait for the Lord. Seek His face! Trust He is already on His way to bring deliverance and salvation in this life and the next!

Readings for tomorrow: Lamentations 3:37-5:22

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August 30, 2022

Next Steps

Readings for today: Lamentations 3:37-5:22

What comes after lament? That's a question I often deal with as a pastor. I walk with people through crisis. I sit with people in their grief. I do my best to comfort them as they mourn. I help them process their pain. After making space for all of the heartache, what comes next? After walking through the valley of the shadow of death together, what happens when one gets to the other side? Honestly, in my experience, this is where the hard work really begins.

I think of a woman I once knew who was married for decades. On the outside, things in their family looked good. He was very successful in his business. They were able to travel the world together. Pursue whatever their hearts desired. But after he passed and the funeral was over, the real truth began to emerge. Alcoholism. Abuse. A life of torment and fear. As the widow and I met to process what she was feeling, we talked about her need for healing. Her need to recover. Her need to be patient and give herself time to work through all the emotions she was experiencing. We also talked about what life would look like on the other side. Her desire to be married again. Her desire to pursue some of the dreams her husband had denied her. Her desire to reconnect with their estranged children and recover some of the years they had lost. This would require a lot of introspection and self-reflection. Owning what she needed to own and disowning what she needed to disown. Thankfully, she had the courage to walk the road faithfully before the Lord. She took up hobbies like horseback riding and cooking. She renewed her relationship with her son. She began dating a good man who treated her with the love and respect she deserved. It was beautiful to watch.

We catch Jeremiah at a much earlier, much darker place in the journey. He is still very much processing his pain. The heartache is real. The emotions are visceral. Though the reading is hard, it is good to know we can be raw and real before God. At the same time, we see the stirrings of a new season begin to emerge as well. Jeremiah calling for the people of Israel to think about what comes next after lament. Once they've fully grieved, they will need to take some time to reflect and repent and renew their faith and trust in God. "Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come? Why should the living complain about the punishment of their sins? Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord! Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven…" (Lamentations 3:37-41) Jeremiah knows what comes next. He knows the people of God must return to Him if they are experience the healing and restoration their hearts so desperately long for.

Anyone who has ever walked with grief knows the journey well. It begins in deep darkness where it's hard to see any light at all. Momentum begins to pick up as we take our initial steps and the darkness doesn't seem as deep. As we continue walking the road, a light does appear at the end of the tunnel. Eventually, as we keep doing the work, we emerge into the bright sunshine of a new day. God is faithful! He will walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death and as we turn to Him - lifting up our hearts and hands in worship - He promises to cast out all our fear and bring us to green pastures and still waters, to places where we will find our souls restored.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 1-4

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August 31, 2022

Seeing God's Glory

Readings for today: Ezekiel 1-4

How many times have I prayed over the years to see the glory of God? But am I prepared for God to answer that prayer? Reading through the opening words of Ezekiel is a bit frightening. Ezekiel's vision of God's glory is simply overwhelming. Angels in flight. Faces constantly shifting and changing. Wheels spinning. Fire and lightning flashing. It levels the prophet. "Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking." (Ezekiel 1:28) Such is always the case when we come face to face with God's glory. Moses could only bear to see it in passing. Isaiah cried out in fear because he was a man of unclean lips. Ezekiel falls on his face. Even the disciples fall down prostrate before the Lord when He reveals Himself in power and exercises His divine authority.

Thankfully, God doesn't leave us on our faces. He is not interested in making us grovel before Him. He has no need to prove Himself to us or demonstrate His power over us. Instead, He lifts us up. He invites us to become part of what He's doing in the world. He encourages us and strengthens us. Listen to what He says to Ezekiel, "Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you." And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me." (Ezekiel 2:1-2) God has a plan for Ezekiel's life. He will use Ezekiel to speak His Word to His people. There will be words of comfort and confrontation. Blessed words of hope and strong words of warning. It's an open question as to whether or not they will receive God's Word but no matter what they will know a prophet has been among them. A man full of the Spirit of the Living God.

The Word Ezekiel is called to preach is not easy. The Spirit of God will make his face like flint. His forehead like emery. His words will fall on deaf ears and hard hearts. Most likely, Ezekiel will be an outcast. Isolated and lonely. Perpetually misunderstood. Many will believe he is insane. Still the call remains. This makes Ezekiel bitter on some level. He must feel trapped. Torn between the overwhelming glory of God on one hand and the hard hearts of his own people on the other. "Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me the voice of a great earthquake: "Blessed be the glory of the Lord from its place!"…The Spirit lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the Lord being strong upon me. And I came to the exiles at Tel-abib, who were dwelling by the Chebar canal, and I sat where they were dwelling. And I sat there overwhelmed among them seven days." (Ezekiel 3:12, 14-15)

Only the Spirit of God can sustain such a call. Only the Spirit of God can hold him together as he faces the challenges of the years ahead and fulfills God's call on his life. Standing as a watchman. Lying on each side for over a year. Eating unclean food cooked over human waste. It's brutal. And yet the Spirit is there with him to sustain him miraculously. Every time Ezekiel falls, the Spirit lifts him up. Every time Ezekiel finds himself at a loss for words, the Spirit is there to give him the words to speak. Every time Ezekiel feels alone and afraid, he feels the Lord's hand upon him. "And the hand of the Lord was upon me there. And he said to me, "Arise, go out into the valley, and there I will speak with you." So I arose and went out into the valley, and behold, the glory of the Lord stood there, like the glory that I had seen by the Chebar canal, and I fell on my face. But the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and he spoke with me and said to me, "Go, shut yourself within your house. And you, O son of man, behold, cords will be placed upon you, and you shall be bound with them, so that you cannot go out among the people. And I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be mute and unable to reprove them, for they are a rebellious house. But when I speak with you, I will

open your mouth, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’ He who will hear, let him hear; and he who will refuse to hear, let him refuse, for they are a rebellious house.” (Ezekiel 3:22-27)

We live in challenging times ourselves. It’s easy to become discouraged when we see what’s happening all around us. When we encounter the hardened hearts of so many people. When people refuse to listen to the Lord and return to Him. It’s easy to become bitter and disillusioned when we see so much pain. So much suffering. So much heartbreak. Much of it self-inflicted. This is especially true for those of us who have seen God’s glory revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ. Once we come to know Him, we can’t imagine life without Him. His Spirit comes to live inside us, lifting us up out of the dust and ashes. He strengthens us and encourages us. He confronts us and convicts us. He heals us and restores us. He sustains us through every trial and wipes away ever tear. No matter what challenges you may face, know God is with you today!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 5-8

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September 1, 2022

The End of God's Judgment

Readings for today: Ezekiel 5-8

Today's reading is as difficult as it gets. Violence. Disease. Famine. Destruction. Pain. Suffering. God delivering His people over to judgment. It is hard to read. Harder still to try and picture. But the hardest part is to accept is that this is all from God. All a part of His plan. It raises some extremely difficult questions. How can this be the same God who promised compassion and steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love Him? How can this be the same God who will later reveal Himself fully and completely in Jesus Christ? How can this God of wrath be the same God of love? Is this God schizophrenic? Can He be trusted? Is such a God even worthy of our love?

These are all important questions to ponder but they also ultimately miss the point. God is God. He has made known His will. He has established His covenant. He has made clear His expectations. From the beginning, He held nothing back. Nothing hidden. Nothing secret. He created us to fulfill His purposes. He is the Potter. We are the clay. Our problem is we keep forgetting our place. We keep rejecting our role. We refuse to acknowledge His Lordship over our lives. Starting with Adam and Eve, we keep asserting our independence. We keep trying to be our own gods. Do things our own way. Worship as we please. Do things as we choose. And we forget the One we were created to serve. We forget the One we were created to please.

We cannot say we haven't been warned. God is more patient with us than we deserve. He forbears for generations as the sin piles up. He continues to reach out in love only to have the door slammed in His face over and over again. He continues to show us grace though we deserve judgment. He continues to be faithful though we ignore Him and walk away. There are consequences to such actions. The apostle Paul talks about them in Romans 1, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of humanity..." And how does that wrath manifest itself according to Paul? God simply withdraws His hand. He "gives us over" to the lusts of our hearts. The lust of our eyes. Our pride and arrogance. And the results are ugly. Human beings, left unchecked, are often brutal creatures. It was Robert Burns who first coined the phrase, "Man's inhumanity to man" in a poem he wrote in 1787 and the events of the last few hundred years only serve to confirm his analysis of the human condition. We are capable of unfathomable evil. We are capable of the most horrific violence. We are capable of the most dehumanizing behavior. And if we're totally honest, we all know this to be true. Given the right conditions, all of us are capable of just about anything. (See the infamous "Stanford Prison Experiment" of 1971.)

How should a just and holy God respond? Righteous judgment. Our sin offends God on a level we simply cannot understand. Listen to how Ezekiel describes how God feels, "Then those of you who escape will remember me among the nations where they are carried captive, how I have been broken over their whoring heart that has departed from me and over their eyes that go whoring after their idols." (Ezekiel 6:9) God takes our sin seriously. Our problem is we don't take it seriously enough. We gloss it over. We make excuses. We rationalize our behavior. We justify our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. We foolishly believe we are somehow special and will escape judgment. We presume upon our relationship with God. We are just like Israel who believed they were "immune" because they were God's chosen people.

But God will not be mocked. He vents His fury without mercy. "Thus shall my anger spend itself, and I will vent my fury upon them and satisfy myself. And they shall know that I am the Lord —that I have

spoken in my jealousy—when I spend my fury upon them." (Ezekiel 5:13) It is scary. It is frightening. It makes us tremble. And if we aren't careful we will miss what God is trying to do. In our fear, we will focus yet again on all the wrong things. God's judgment is NOT an end in itself! It points beyond itself to something far greater! Far more important!

"That they may know I am the Lord." Over and over again we read this refrain. God using judgment to cleanse His people. To refine them. To separate the gold from the dross. The wheat from the chaff. He disciplines them in His love. He confronts the evil of their hearts. He forces them to come face to face with the depth of their sin. The utter futility of their idolatry. The full measure of their rebellion. Yes, it is harsh but it is also true. It is just. It is fair. It right. It is good. And it is ultimately designed to bring them back in humility to the Lord. They must be broken. Their hardened hearts must be crushed. Their stiff necks bent. God will bring them to their knees through judgment so they may again experience the joy of being in right relationship with Him. This is the point of their exile. This is the point of their suffering. God wants His people back. And He will not relent until they return.

It's a sobering reality. Especially for us Christians. To think of all that Christ endured as the Father poured His wrath out on His Son. To consider all Christ went through as he experienced the depths of hell and God-forsakenness. He took on the full weight of human sin. As terrifying as the judgment is in Ezekiel, it pales in comparison to the judgment Christ suffered on the Cross. Reading these words through the prism of the Cross should make us appreciate more and more the wonder of Christ's sacrifice for us. We should find ourselves marveling at the great love of a God who would take our place. Bring judgment on Himself. Freely lay down His life in order to save us from our sin. Amazing love! How can it be that Thou my God wouldst die for me?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 9-12

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September 2, 2022

Seeking God's Glory

Readings for today: Ezekiel 9-12

It is hard for us to fathom the national catastrophe that befell Israel. Harder still for us to understand the depth of their pain and suffering. Living as we do in the world's most powerful nation, we cannot begin to grasp what it would be like to watch your entire way of life destroyed. However, all of that pales in comparison to the tragedy Ezekiel sees in his vision today. All the destruction. All the loss of life. All the famine and disease. None of that would have compared to the grief he felt watching the Lord leave His Temple.

From the moment God had indwelled the Tabernacle in the wilderness, Israel had never been alone. They enjoyed His protection. They enjoyed His provision. He gave them victory after victory. Established them in the Promised Land. Took up residence in Jerusalem once they built the Temple. Over time, the Israelites began to take Him for granted. In fact, there was a sense in Jeremiah and Ezekiel's time that the Lord was somehow "trapped" in the Temple. They believed they had the Lord caged. He ceased to be their god and had now become a totem. A magic talisman that kept them from evil. This is why they stubbornly refused to leave Jerusalem when Jeremiah called them to submit to Nebuchadnezzar. They falsely believed as long as they had the Lord locked down in His Temple, they could never be fully defeated.

Imagine their shock when Ezekiel relates his vision of the Lord leaving the Temple. Departing from the east gate. Rising above the cherubim where He normally sat. Heading out of the city that bore His name. Imagine their fear as their one hope departs, leaving them alone for the first time since their days in Egypt. It's difficult for us wrap our minds around simply because we believe God is everywhere all the time. We hold onto the promise that God is always with us. We trust He will never leave us or forsake us.

But what if the Lord is leading us into exile? What if the Lord is leading us into a season of suffering? What if the Lord is seeking to refine us and sanctify us? Are we willing to go where He leads? The reality is we too often take the Lord for granted. We too act as if He's "trapped" in a relationship with us. As if God is "bound" by His unconditional love for us. We falsely believe our thoughts, attitudes, and actions don't matter. We falsely believe we can reject holiness as a way of life. We falsely believe God's primary goal is our personal happiness. Nothing could be further from the truth. God does love us with an everlasting love. God does love us unconditionally. Nothing can snatch us out of His hand. Yes. Yes. Yes. But make no mistake, God is not "bound" to us. He is not "trapped" in this relationship. He is not co-dependent on us nor does He allow our whims, our feelings, our desires to shape His will for our lives. We sin at our own risk. We run ahead of God at our own peril. We stubbornly refuse to follow Him and invite despair into our lives.

Perhaps the best example of how God relates to us comes from the story Jesus tells of the prodigal son in Luke 15. The younger son comes to his father in the tale and asks for his inheritance. He wants nothing to do with his family any longer. He wants to be on his own. Live according to his own rules. Follow his own path. Find his own happiness. So he takes his money and leaves. The father lets him go. Many years pass. The son has spent all he has on sinful pursuits. He has abandoned all his father taught him. Now he's desperate. Alone. Afraid. Ashamed. One day he plucks up the courage to go home. He has no hope his father will accept back into the family but he thinks he might be able to catch on as a hired servant. But while he is far off, the father sees him. The father's been waiting by the door.

Watching out the window. Longing. Praying. Looking forward to the day when his son will come to his senses. The father runs to him. Embraces him. Gives him a robe to wear and places the signet ring back on his finger. He is home. He is one of the family again.

It's a powerful story. One that reminds us of the great love of God. It should also remind us of the consequences of our sin. The father never stopped loving the son just as God never stops loving us. But the father did let the son go. He did let the son make his own sinful decisions and then let him face the terrible consequences. The same was true for Israel. God did indeed come to dwell in His Temple. Like the father from the story, He loved His children unconditionally. Over and over He forgave them. But then there came a day when they finally said, "We don't want you here anymore. We don't want to be your children. We want to do our own thing. Live our own lives. Pursue our own happiness. Chase our own dreams. And they don't include you." So the Father did what they asked. He left His home in their hands. He removed His glorious presence. The result is pain. Suffering. Heartbreak. Such is always the case when we abandon God. At the same time, Ezekiel sounds a note of hope. Presumably, God could have chosen to leave His Temple and head in any direction. He went east. East to where the exiles lived. East to Babylon. East to find His wayward children. East to be with them in captivity. East to comfort them in their diaspora. East to provide for them and make them prosper. East to join them.

Friends, God's glory doesn't need a Temple. A house made with human hands. A sanctuary covered in gold. The Bible declares that we are temples of the Holy Spirit! Our hearts have become the residence of God Himself! This is why Ezekiel declares, "And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God." (Ezekiel 11:19-20) Furthermore, it's why the Apostle Paul will later declare, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16) Because God's Spirit has taken up residence in our hearts, we ourselves are "being transformed into the Christ's image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18) Amazing! The great news of the gospel is that God's glory now lives in us! And this is why we do not take Him for granted or presume upon His grace. Rather we should be deeply humbled by God's willingness to dwell with us and in us and work through us.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 13-16

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September 3, 2022

The Bride of Christ

Readings for today: Ezekiel 13-16

The graphic imagery from chapter 16 of Ezekiel has grown on me over the years. Whereas I initially struggled to get through this chapter and those like it, I now find it presenting a deeply compelling picture of the gospel. A gospel that was as much for Israel as it is for us today. In this chapter, God describes His journey with His people from His point of view. He reminds them He was there at their birth when no one wanted to claim them. He reminds them of His tender mercies and lovingkindness and the lavish blessings He gave to them. He reminds them of their betrayal of His love and His faithfulness to the everlasting covenant He had made. This is their story. This is our story. This is the gospel story.

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

We grew up under God's watchful eye and gracious care. When the time was right, God took us as His bride. He covered our nakedness with the corner of His garment. He made His vow and covenant with us. He bestowed riches and honor and glory on us as befits the bride of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And the whole world marveled at what God had done. The whole world came to see the splendor and glory of Israel just as she came to see the splendor and glory of the church. The whole world envied the relationship we had with our God.

But we grew proud. We began to believe our own hype. We read our own press clippings. We trusted in our riches and beauty and power and influence. We abandoned our covenant with the Lord and began to serve other gods. For Israel, it meant worshipping other gods. Establishing high places where sacrifices could be made to pagan deities. Creating and fashioning idols just like all the other nations. We fall into this same trap as well. We worship the gods of money and sex and power and success. We sacrifice time and talent and treasure and even our families to pursue these things. In either case, God's bride is now playing the whore. Literally taking the gifts God has given her and giving them away to idols. "How sick is your heart, declares the Lord God, because you did all these things, the deeds of a brazen prostitute..." (Ezekiel 16:30)

Therefore God brings judgment on His bride. "For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God..." (1 Peter 4:17) God will not spare her and in fact, holds her to a higher standard. Higher than Samaria. Higher than Sodom. Higher than the happy pagans that live around us. "Bear your disgrace, you also, for you have intervened on behalf of your sisters. Because of your sins in which you acted more abominably than they, they are more in the right than you. So be ashamed, you also, and bear

your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous.” (Ezekiel 16:52) God disciplines those He loves out of a desire to see us cleansed from sin and brought to glory. "My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by Him. For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son or daughter whom He receives." (Hebrews 12:5-6) His desire is for His bride to return home. To remain faithful and true. To remember from whence she came and to honor her Divine Husband for all He has done. Why? So the world may again marvel at the intimacy of their relationship. “For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?” (Deuteronomy 4:7)

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

Readings for tomorrow: None

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September 5, 2022

Divine Justice

Readings for today: Ezekiel 17-20

Today's reading poses a very important question. Actually, it's more of an accusation. "You say, 'The way of the Lord is not just." (Ezekiel 18:25) If we're honest, this is a question we've all asked at one time or another. Perhaps even an accusation we've leveled at God at different points of our lives. Frankly, this isn't new. God's people have been wrestling with God over this issue for centuries. They look at their history. They look at their circumstances. They ponder their suffering. Because of the difficulties they face in their lives, they wonder how God could allow such things to happen. They wonder how a good God could allow evil to flourish. They wonder how a loving God could stand by and watch His people endure such pain. They wonder how a gracious God could be so demanding. I hear it all the time and I sympathize for I've wrestled deeply with this issue myself.

Here's the hard but honest truth. From the very beginning, we've been avoiding the responsibilities that come with being made in God's image and being given a mandate to care for all creation. Instead of humbly acknowledging the ways we have failed, we too often try to find someone else to blame. Instead of looking in the mirror and coming to grips with the depths of our self-centeredness, we look to God and try to blame-shift. We seek an escape from the natural consequences of our sinful behavior by pretending the issue is somehow with God..."He made me this way", "He set up the world like this", "He is the one who allows evil to flourish..."

God will have none of it. "Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it; for the injustice that he has done he shall die. Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life. Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?" (Ezekiel 18:25-29) God makes it very clear that He will not allow us to skirt our responsibilities. Our sin is the root of the evil we see in the world. Our rebellion is the reason for our difficult circumstances. Our refusal to follow the ways of God is why we face such suffering and hardship with so little hope. It is not God's arm that is shortened or God's strength that has failed or God's justice that has let us down. The failure is our own.

Thankfully, God is merciful. He is gracious. He loves us despite our sin. Listen to His words from Ezekiel 18 and be encouraged. "Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die." Your soul is God's. Whether you believe or disbelieve. Whether you are good or evil. Whether you feel worthy or unworthy. Your soul is God's. He holds you in His hand. "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." You are only responsible for you. You are not responsible for the sins of your parents or friends or extended family. You are not at the mercy of your family's dysfunction or the baggage from your broken history. You are not simply the product of your genetic makeup. If you are a Christian, you are a rational, spiritual creature who is endowed by Christ with His Spirit to make godly choices. "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" God doesn't delight in your pain. God is not immune to your suffering. God does not derive a sadistic pleasure from the death of anyone, including the wicked. He loves everyone He made in His image and desires all to be saved and come to

a knowledge of His truth. "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live." What God desires is NOT perfection but repentance. Humility rather than pride. A broken and contrite heart, God will never despise.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 21-24

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September 6, 2022

We Want Justice!

Readings for today: Ezekiel 21-24

I remember my first trip into inner city Trenton, NJ. My wife and I were going there to spend time with mentors and friends. When we arrived, we parked outside their row home and I watched as my friend stood on his front stoop and made eye contact with several different people on the block. When we went inside, I asked him what he was doing. He told me he was letting the people he lived among know I was under his protection. He lived in an impoverished neighborhood plagued by drugs and gang violence. Trenton has one of the highest homicide rates in the country. Every evening at 5PM during the week, the city empties out as government employees flee to the suburbs. When we lived nearby in grad school, there were very few restaurants. No hotels. No night life to speak of. It was a city desperate for redevelopment but unfortunately the political leadership was notoriously corrupt.

I was reminded of Trenton when I read our passage today from Ezekiel. Like I said yesterday, we struggle when we get to the prophetic books of the Bible because of the harsh judgment of God. But then you start to catalog all the sins Israel has committed over the years. All the suffering she has caused. All the violence and corruption and idolatry. Add it all up and it starts to make sense. Chapter 22 begins with a question from God to his prophet. Essentially, is Jerusalem worthy of judgment? God's answer? I will declare to her all her abominations…

She is a "a city that sheds blood in her midst, so that her time may come, and that makes idols to defile herself!" (Ezekiel 22:3) Her leaders are corrupt. They are violent men who shed innocent blood. "Behold, the princes of Israel in you, every one according to his power, have been bent on shedding blood. (Ezekiel 22:6) The commandments are ignored. Father and mother are not honored. The Sabbath is not kept. The worship of the Living God is impure. (Ezekiel 22:7-8) Furthermore, the immigrant and refugee are exploited. The poor and fatherless and widows are not cared for. Bribery and extortion are common. (Ezekiel 22:7, 12) Sexual immorality is rampant. (Ezekiel 22:9-11) The priests of God commit sacrilege and heresy. They no longer follow the ritual purity rites set up by God to govern worship. The prophets of God tell lies. They embrace deceit. They whitewash the sins of God's people. The princes of God are greedy. Selfish. Power-hungry. Tyrants who only care about themselves. (Ezekiel 22: 26-28) And the people follow their lead.

No wonder God is angry! The people He called by His name and set apart for Himself to be a light to the Gentiles and a witness to the nations have now become an abomination. They commit sin with impunity. They have no shame. God has warned them over and over again and has been ignored. Now the sword of God's judgment will come. Israel will reap what she has rightfully sown. She will suffer God's judgment as He seeks to purify her once again. "Son of man, the house of Israel has become dross to me; all of them are bronze and tin and iron and lead in the furnace; they are dross of silver. Therefore thus says the Lord God: Because you have all become dross, therefore, behold, I will gather you into the midst of Jerusalem. As one gathers silver and bronze and iron and lead and tin into a furnace, to blow the fire on it in order to melt it, so I will gather you in my anger and in my wrath, and I will put you in and melt you. I will gather you and blow on you with the fire of my wrath, and you shall be melted in the midst of it. As silver is melted in a furnace, so you shall be melted in the midst of it, and you shall know that I am the Lord; I have poured out my wrath upon you." (Ezekiel 22:18-22)

The important thing to note here is that God's judgment is not an end in itself. It is always the means to a greater end which is to separate the dross from the silver. To refine all the impurities out of God's

people. God places us in the “furnace of affliction” (Isaiah 48:10) in order to make us pure as gold. I know this may be a new thought to some of you. You aren’t used to hearing things like “God disciplines those He loves” but it’s true. I know when I look back at the hardest and most difficult times of my own life - growing up in an alcoholic home, losing my firstborn son, watching my career implode, almost losing my marriage, etc. - I can see how God used those times to expose some things that I needed to surrender to Him. He exposed my sin. He exposed my selfishness. He exposed my pride. He exposed my addictions. He brought all those things to the light of day so they could be dealt with once and for all at the cross. For it is at the cross of Christ where God’s judgment and God’s mercy meet. Surrender your will to Him, friends, so you may experience His mercy and grace today!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 25-28

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September 7, 2022

Never Rejoice at Another Person's Fall

Readings for today: Ezekiel 25-28

Several years ago, I was hanging out with a group of middle school boys. It was our first small group of the year. The lesson happened to be on Genesis 1:27 where God describes how He made human beings in His image. Male and female. Black and white. Rich and poor. All bearing the signature stamp of their Creator. We talked through the implications of this passage for each of them as they started school. Within the first few days their peer groups had already formed. The pecking order quickly established. They knew who was popular and who was not. They knew who the jocks were and the nerds. They knew the kids who struggled and those who seemed to always succeed. Then we flipped over to Galatians 3:26-28 where the Apostle Paul challenges us to move beyond our social categories and divisions and embrace one another in Christ. After the conversation, we discussed how we could put this principle into practice. Each boy was challenged to think of a student they knew that they struggled to love. It could be someone they knew was lonely. Someone they knew had few friends. Perhaps even someone they made fun of or even bullied on occasion. The accountability point for that particular week was to approach that student and find a way to love them concretely in the name of Jesus. Sit with them at lunch. Hang out with them at recess. Invite them over to hang.

As Christians, we do not celebrate the struggles of others. We do not rejoice at their fall. We do not take secret pleasure in their pain. Ezekiel makes it clear that people who do such things will be judged. Either as individuals or as nations. The nations surrounding Israel watched them struggle and eventually fall into ruin. They rejoiced when it happened. Threw parties. Danced in the streets. They even took the opportunity to pile on for their own revenge. Ammon. Moab. Seir. Edom. Philistia. Tyre. All of them are guilty. All of them are judged. Perhaps Tyre most harshly. God even compares her king to Satan. "You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle; and crafted in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created they were prepared. You were an anointed guardian cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till unrighteousness was found in you. In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence in your midst, and you sinned; so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, and I destroyed you, O guardian cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire. Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor. I cast you to the ground..." (Ezekiel 28:12-17) No one escapes God's righteous judgment. No one gets a pass. Not Satan. Not the kings of this world. Not pastors like me. Not middle school boys like the ones in my small group that year.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 29-32

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September 8, 2022

No Other Gods

Readings for today: Ezekiel 29-32

The original temptation that caused humanity to fall into sin was "you shall be like God." The first commandment given to Israel on Mt. Sinai says "You shall have no other gods before Me." The greatest commandment according to Jesus is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength." In the Book of Revelation, God describes Himself as "the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." From the opening chapters of Genesis to the closing chapters of Revelation, God makes it very clear that there is only one God. He alone is worthy of our worship. He alone deserves our praise and adoration. He alone demands our complete and total allegiance. He alone is to be obeyed. When we violate this fundamental truth, we place ourselves in grave peril for God will not be mocked. He will not share His glory with another. He will allow no rival to ascend His throne.

Tragically, this doesn't stop humanity from making the attempt. Over and over again, we seek to scale the heights of heaven. Over and over again, we seek to make a name for ourselves. Beginning with the Tower of Babel, every great human civilization sets out to be like God. The kings and pharaohs and emperors and prime ministers and presidents style themselves as gods. They believe they can do no wrong. They believe might makes right. They believe they hold the authority over life and death. They believe they deserve to be worshipped and praised and adored. Sure, it may not be as obvious in the modern world as it was in the ancient world where a king like Pharaoh literally declared himself a god but you see some of the same signs nonetheless. Humanity making the same mistake over and over again. Falling for the same temptation over and over again. Listen to the litany laid out in Ezekiel…

"Egypt is delivered to the sword; drag her away, and all her multitudes."

"Assyria is there, and all her company, its graves all around it, all of them slain, fallen by the sword…"

"Elam is there, and all her multitude around her grave; all of them slain, fallen by the sword, who went down uncircumcised into the world below, who spread their terror in the land of the living; and they bear their shame with those who go down to the pit."

"Meshech-Tubal is there, and all her multitude, her graves all around it, all of them uncircumcised, slain by the sword; for they spread their terror in the land of the living."

"Edom is there, her kings and all her princes, who for all their might are laid with those who are killed by the sword; they lie with the uncircumcised, with those who go down to the pit."

"The princes of the north are there, all of them, and all the Sidonians, who have gone down in shame with the slain, for all the terror that they caused by their might; they lie uncircumcised with those who are slain by the sword, and bear their shame with those who go down to the pit."

"When Pharaoh sees them, he will be comforted for all his multitude, Pharaoh and all his army, slain by the sword, declares the Lord God." (Ezekiel 32:20, 22, 24, 26, 29-31)

One after the other, the great civilizations of the ancient near east decline and fall under God's mighty hand. The same thing will eventually happen to Babylon and Persia and Greece and Rome and Germany and England and Russia and America. Every human civilization that seeks greatness and

wealth and power and immorality will one day fall. This is God's promise. "Therefore thus says the Lord God: Because it towered high and set its top among the clouds, and its heart was proud of its height, I will give it into the hand of a mighty one of the nations. He shall surely deal with it as its wickedness deserves. I have cast it out. Foreigners, the most ruthless of nations, have cut it down and left it. On the mountains and in all the valleys its branches have fallen, and its boughs have been broken in all the ravines of the land, and all the peoples of the earth have gone away from its shadow and left it. On its fallen trunk dwell all the birds of the heavens, and on its branches are all the beasts of the field. All this is in order that no trees by the waters may grow to towering height or set their tops among the clouds, and that no trees that drink water may reach up to them in height. For they are all given over to death, to the world below, among the children of man, with those who go down to the pit." (Ezekiel 31:10-14)

Why is God so jealous for His name? It's because of His great love for us. God knows the kingdoms of this world are corrupt. God knows how often they fail. God knows they are not ultimately trustworthy. He knows they are not safe. It's why He calls His people to place their trust only in Him. He is God. He is eternal. Unchangeable. Immovable. Immeasurable. Immortal. Indestructible. Imperishable. He alone can be depended on. He alone can save us from the powers of sin and death. He alone has the power and authority to rule and reign over all He has made. He alone is God.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 33-36

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September 9, 2022

The Gift of God's Spirit

Readings for today: Ezekiel 33-36

Today's reading brings with it a cascade of images. Watchmen. Shepherds. Scattered sheep. New covenants. Ancient prophecies. Culminating in one of the most beautiful promises in the Old Testament...the gift of God's Spirit. Is there a thread that ties this all together? Or does God simply have too many tabs open in His browser? Is there a common tie or theme or guiding principle at work here? Or is God doing His best "Jackson Pollock" impersonation? Sometimes when we read the Old Testament, especially in the prophetic literature, it can feel scattershot. Like a bunch of random events some scribe collated at a later date, one not necessarily having to do with any other.

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

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

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

Why would God do such a thing? For the sake of His great name. "Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you

have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes." (Ezekiel 36:22-23) Remember, God's primary concern from creation to redemption to final glorification is His own glory. His own honor. His own reputation. God will make His name famous on the earth. God will make Himself known among the nations. God's name will be lifted up! God will be worshipped in the way He deserves and the way He demands! One day, every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth! And what's happening here in Ezekiel is just a foretaste of what's to come.

So how will God make this happen? How will He take a stubborn and rebellious and sinful people and turn them into worshippers? Listen to what God Himself says He will do, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God." (Ezekiel 36:25-28) Isn't this amazing? God is not content to sit up in heaven and wait for us to get it right. He isn't going to sit back and watch as we work our tails off to get to Him. He isn't going to stand by as we struggle and suffer and fight the forces of darkness that attack us on every side. No. He WILL rescue! He WILL redeem! He WILL save! He lifts us up. Holds us in His arms. Bathes us in His grace. Transplants our broken hearts. Infuses us with His very Spirit. Gives us new desires. New appetites. New loves. And so we find ourselves walking in God's ways. Obeying His rules. Living by His commands. Not because we have to but because we want to! Not because we're forced to but because we long to show our devotion to our Heavenly Father! Not out of fear or anxiety of what might happen if we make a mistake but from a deep sense of peace and security that flows from our confidence in the unconditional love of God.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 37-40

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September 10, 2022

Can Dry Bones Live Again?

Readings for today: Ezekiel 37-40

Ezekiel 37 and the valley of dry bones is one of my favorite passages in all the Bible. I love how God uses Ezekiel to literally raise the dead to new life. In a sense, every time I get up to preach this is my prayer. I ask God to awaken hearts that may have become dry and stale 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 find ourselves in. 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 razed 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 prophecies 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 prophecies 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 far too long, it has tolerated sin. Think of the scandals rocking the Roman Catholic Church or the number of influential Protestant pastors whose moral failings have been exposed. Think of the number of churches who have lost sight of their mission in their arguments over styles of church music or the color of the carpet in the sanctuary. Think of the number of churches who have exchanged the truth of the gospel for the lies of our culture. Think of the number of churches who are closing their doors every day in communities across our country. It is heartbreaking. It can seem hopeless. I close my eyes and it's almost like I can picture the valley filling up with the bones of these formerly great congregations.

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

Readings for tomorrow: None

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September 12, 2022

The Glorious Return of the Lord

Readings for today: Ezekiel 41-44

It's hard to imagine how Ezekiel must have felt when he saw the Lord returning to the Temple. The only thing close to it might be watching the memorial being built after the Towers fell in New York City. To visit Ground Zero or to see the lights shining on a clear night reminds us all to never forget what happened on that terrible day. I still remember sitting in my car, waiting to make a left turn onto Alexander Road from Canal Pointe Blvd, as I headed into Princeton for school that morning. Classes were 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 almost a year. Another friend of mine was serving as the senior pastor of 5th Avenue Presbyterian Church at the time and when the towers fell, he donned his clerical robe, threw open the doors of his sanctuary, and ran out into the streets to usher people into safety. Living in such close proximity to New York meant we knew people personally who experienced the loss of loved ones. Lisa Beamer, whose husband Todd lost his life heroically in the charge to retake Flight 93, went to church literally a few miles away. As terrible as that day was for so many, it is equally if not more powerful to watch our nation memorialize those who fell. Millions visit the memorial and museum each year to pay their respects. It is a powerful witness and testimony to the resilient heart of the American people.

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

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

Life is often hard. There are moments, even seasons, where we feel like everything has come crashing down around us. We lose our job. Homes go into foreclosure. Relationships break down in divorce. We

experience the sudden, tragic loss of someone we love. There is so much in this world that brings us pain and heartbreak. It can even feel at times like the Lord has abandoned us. Ridden off on his chariot somewhere far away, never to return. Don’t believe the lie! God is faithful. He is true. He is steadfast in His love. He will never forsake or abandon you. He is with you. His glory is your sanctuary and your rearguard. If you walk by faith. If you trust in Him. If you surrender to His will and His ways. He will provide for you. He will restore the years the locusts have eaten. He will rebuild the ruins of your life. He will bring forth new growth and new life from the barren ground. This is His promise and He will never fail!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 45-48

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September 13, 2022

Living Waters

Readings for today: Ezekiel 45-48

I love Ezekiel's vision today. Water flowing from the Temple of God. Beginning as a trickle but becoming 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. I've been there. It's desolate. 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. You can see them today. 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 river of the gospel of Jesus Christ just gets deeper and wider as it flows!

But even this is just a foretaste of what's to come! In the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John receives a vision that sounds eerily similar to what Ezekiel received. "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations…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 22:1-2, 17) Friends, God is still on the move! Even after all these centuries, the living waters are still flowing. Lives are still being changed by the gospel. God refuses to remain in His Temple. His grace moves out into the wastelands of our world. Into the darkest places where death reigns. And His grace 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 1-3

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September 14, 2022

Living God's Truth

Readings for today: Daniel 1-3

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

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

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

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

A few more years pass. The king grows so insecure he decides to build a monument to himself and demand everyone fall down in worship before it. It's the height of arrogance. Daniel doesn't appear in this story but his colleagues do. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego follow his example. Confronted with a situation which would force them to break the second commandment, they refuse to bow down in worship and instead stand faithful. The king is furious but the men answer him with grace and truth. "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we

serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." (Daniel 3:16-18) They are thrown into a furnace of fire. The king and his courtiers watch, waiting for them to be consumed. An incredible miracle happens as God Himself appears and delivers them from death. The result is again the humbling of the king. "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God." (Daniel 3:28)

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

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September 15, 2022

Power of Prayer

Readings for today: Daniel 4-6

Daniel was given a powerful position within Babylonian society. He had the ear of the king. He was known for his wisdom and godly character. He never sought personal gain. Never used political maneuvering for his own personal benefit. Never sought power or privilege or higher status. His allegiance was to a much higher authority. He lived for God alone and this made his position unassailable. When his political enemies came after him, they found nothing to pin on him. They dug up no dirt. They found no one who would speak against Daniel. Daniel's deep faith led to true freedom. He was free to speak God's truth to Nebuchadnezzer. Free to confront him on his pride and arrogance. Free to give him the bad news about the meaning of his dreams. Daniel was free to call Nebuchadnezzer to repent which he eventually did.

"King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you! It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me. How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation…At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?…Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble." (Daniel 4:1-3, 34-35, 37)

Where did Daniel find such freedom? Prayer. He humbly presented himself before the Lord multiple times a day. He came before the Lord with praise. He confessed his sins. He lifted up his needs and the needs of his people. And I am convinced Daniel prayed fervently for the kings he served like Nebuchadnezzer. Sometimes it is tempting to think we have it bad in our country. To think our leaders have reached a level of corruption that places them beyond the grace of God. Nothing could be further from the truth! Nebuchadnezzer was one of the world's great tyrants. When Peter and Paul talked about honoring and praying for the emperor, they were talking about Nero of Rome. Christians throughout the centuries and throughout the world today suffer under the harshest of regimes and still they pray for their leaders. Can we do any less?

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 7-9

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September 16, 2022

Visions and Dreams

Readings for today: Daniel 7-9

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Apocalypse

Readings for today: Daniel 10-12

Apocalypse means “revelation.” It’s so common in the Bible that we literally refer to an entire genre as “apocalyptic writing.” Books like Daniel, Ezekiel, Revelation, etc. all fall under this category. They typically involve a prophet being given a vision of the future which they then communicate to God’s people. It often involves dramatic imagery that is notoriously difficult to interpret as they are drawing on ancient near east categories of thought. But the genre serves an important purpose. First and foremost, it sounds a note of judgment against the powers and principalities of this world. Second, it sounds a note of comfort for God’s people by reminding them of God’s sovereign power and plan. Finally, it has a predictive element to it as it often foretells the future. This is certainly the case in Daniel 10-12. Here’s a brief timeline...

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

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

All of this is ancient history to us but it was still very much in the future for Daniel. As God unpacks for him what is to come, he sees tremendous suffering ahead for his people. “And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time...” Under the influence of Haman, Xerxes will try to kill every single Jewish man, woman, and child within the borders of his empire. You can read all about this in the book of Esther. The wars between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid factions will take a tremendous toll on both land and people as many of the battles are fought in and around the borders of Israel. Pagan kings will rape and pillage and burn what God’s people are trying to build. And the worst of them all - Antiochus Epiphanes IV - will literally torture and kill as many Jews

as possible. At the same time these conflicts are raging on earth, there is a battle going on in heaven. Michael and his forces are fighting Satan and his demons and though the battle is fierce, they will prevail just as God's people will prevail on earth. This is why Daniel closes his book with such hopeful words, "But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever." (Daniel 12:1-3)

What's the relevance of all this history for God's people today? No matter what you are going through, know that God is with you. He is literally fighting at your side. He is bringing about His purposes and His will even amidst your hardships. He will send His messengers to serve you. To comfort you. To bless you. He will bring you peace. Though you may experience suffering for a time, He will preserve your life. In fact, He has a reward waiting for you in His heavenly Kingdom. There the righteous will shine like stars in the sky and will reign with Him forever. As Christians, we do not place our hope in the things of this world. We do not place our hope in what we can achieve in this world. We place our hope in God alone.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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September 19, 2022

Rebuilding

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

Our God specializes in rebuilding. He takes what is broken and He builds it back up. He takes what is ruined and He raises it back up. He takes what's been torn down and He pulls it back together. We see it over and over again throughout the Scriptures. After Adam and Eve sin, humanity descends into evil and chaos resulting in a great flood. God rebuilds using Noah. Humanity scatters in confusion at the Tower of Babel when their languages are confused. God rebuilds using Abram. Abram's descendants are enslaved and brutally oppressed in Egypt. God rebuilds using Moses. Israel plunges into complete anarchy at the end of the Book of Judges. God rebuilds using a prophet named Samuel and a king named David. Both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel fall into idolatry and are invaded. Their way of life destroyed and the people carried off into exile. God rebuilds using men like Nehemiah, Ezra, and Zerubbabel.

God rebuilds His Temple. God rebuilds His city. Most importantly, God rebuilds His people. He brings them back home just as He promised. He stirs the heart of a pagan king. A Persian named Cyrus who has destroyed the Babylonian empire. A royal decree is issued. Sacred elements are gathered. The people begin their journey back home. It's a massive undertaking involving thousands of people. Genealogical records are consulted to make sure the leaders all come from the correct lineage. Those eligible for the priesthood are identified. Those eligible to serve from the Levite tribe are identified. The direct descendants of the temple servants and royal servants are identified so they can all be restored to their rightful place, God leaving no detail left to chance. When they arrive, the first thing they do is rebuild the altar so they can worship. They keep the Feast of Booths according to God's Word. And most importantly, they lay the foundation of a new Temple which causes the old to weep and the young to praise. It had to be quite a moment.

Sadly sin will run its course once more. God's people will struggle and suffer yet again. As Daniel foretold, they will become a pawn in a much greater conflict as kingdoms clash over the legacy left by Alexander the Great. Eventually, Rome will rise and crush all in her path. Herod the Great will be installed as a "client king" set to rule over Israel. In a bid to curry favor, he will refurbish the Temple but his corruption and penchant for violence is evident to all. Tensions rise. Factions jockey for power and influence. Israel is a powderkeg ready to blow at anytime. And into this mess, a baby is born. A child grows up. His name is Jesus. Come to save His people from their sins. Come to rebuild the ancient ruins. Come to restore God's Kingdom once and for all. He dies on a cross. An apparent failure. But three days later, He rises from the dead in glorious triumph! Delivering the final, decisive blow to sin and evil in this world. Right before He ascends into heaven, He commissions His disciples. His follower. Those who would eventually be called "Christian" to carry on His rebuilding work. Armed with tools like compassion and grace and mercy, they are to go out into the world proclaiming the gospel to every tribe, tongue and nation. They are charged to build up a spiritual house. Equipping the saints for the work of God's Kingdom.

So what about you? Where is God at work in your life today? Where is He rebuilding? Where is He restoring? How is He using you to rebuild and restore others in His name?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 4-6

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September 20, 2022

Faith over Fear

Readings for today: Ezra 4-6

I am turning fifty in March and as I think back over my life, I can point to many places where I faced a choice between fear or faith. When I chose the path of fear, I ended up in a dark place. I became anxious and depressed. I didn't sleep well. I lacked motivation. I made all kinds of excuses. I blamed everyone and everything around me. My heart was full of regrets. When I chose the path of faith, I found my spirits lifted. I experienced freedom. Peace that passed all understanding. I slept well. I woke up energized every morning. I took responsibility. I owned my successes and my failures. I had no regrets. No second guessing. My life was rich and full.

Our reading from Ezra today illustrates what God's people can do when they walk by faith. Sadly, it also illustrates what can happen when God's people walk in fear. "Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia." (Ezra 4:4-5) Zerubbabel and leaders of God's people had rightly rejected the offer of help from the people of the land for the god they worshipped was not the God of Israel. The people who had been resettled in the land after the Assyrian Empire wiped out the Northern Kingdom of Israel were a mixed group culled from different tribes and nations. They each brought their own ideas of god to the table and the result was a syncretized view of god that bore no resemblance to the God of Israel. If Zerubbabel allowed them to work alongside God's people as they rebuilt the Temple, there was a very real danger that the worship of God would become polluted and corrupt. The people of the land didn't take their rejection well. They embarked on a campaign of intimidation, threatening God's people with the very real consequences of opposing the might of the Persian Empire. The rebuilding work was hanging by a thread.

Thankfully, there were those who chose a different path. The path of faith. Haggai and Zechariah rose up to prophesy. Prophesy in this case had little to do with future-telling and more to do with truth-telling. They preached in the name of the God of Israel. Reminding God's people of God's sovereign power and authority. They encouraged the leaders of God's people to renew the work and trust in God's faithfulness and so the work resumed. It's important to note that the people still faced opposition. They still had to overcome all kinds of resistance. The factors that made them afraid in the first place didn't magically disappear. The difference now was that their focus was on God and not on all the obstacles standing in their way. Their eyes were fixed on God's mission rather than on all the reasons they couldn't or wouldn't be successful. Their faith gave them the strength to persevere through the challenges and setbacks rather than succumb to them.

What about you? Where does life find you today? As you think about the challenges you face in your own life, are you choosing the path of faith or the path of fear? Are you fixing your eyes on Jesus or do you find yourself consumed by all the stress and anxiety of your circumstances? Are you clinging to hope or are you paralyzed by doubt and indecision? Friends, God is with you! He promises to walk by your side every step of the way. Trust Him. Listen to Him. Lean not on your own understanding but in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths.

Readings for tomorrow: Haggai 1-2

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PUTTING GOD FIRST

Readings for today: Haggai 1-2

I once had neighbors who tried to have it all. They both held lucrative jobs that paid six figures annually but caused them to travel most of the year. Their two kids were in competitive sports which held practices before and after school almost every day. Weekends were spent traveling to games all over the country. They rarely took a season off. They had a beautiful home they rarely slept in. Two new cars they rarely drove. They had so little time left over for friends or family or even each other. Sadly, it came as no surprise that they were soon divorced and their kids estranged. Their home sold. Their possessions divided. Both of them relocating to different parts of the country to start over.

I was reminded of their story when I read these words from Haggai today, "Now, therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes." (Haggai 1:5-6) I meet people all the time who fall into this trap. They chase the world's promises only to end up running on empty. They spend their lives acquiring possessions. Achieving success at all costs. Moving up the corporate ladder. Allowing their kids' activities to eat up all of their extra time. The results are not pretty. Divorce. The breakdown of the family. A deep sense of isolation and loneliness. Superficial friendships. And definitely no room for God.

Haggai calls us to a different way. He calls us to put God first. To honor God with our time and our talent and our treasure. To give God the firstfruits of our labors not the leftovers. "Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord. You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld their dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors." (Haggai 1:7-11) This passage isn't really about the Temple. God doesn't need us to build Him a home. It's not like God lacks a place to live. What this is really about is the priority of our hearts. Do we put God first? Are we willing to take care of the things He cares about before we take care of the things we care about? Is He number one in our lives or is that just lip service? Do we order our lives around His ways and His commands or do we take Him for granted?

All of us have a chance today to "consider our ways." All of us have an opportunity to sit down with our schedules and our bank statements and evaluate where we spend our time and money. All of us can take stock of where we put our energy and talent and resources. Do we spend time with God every day? Do we gather in person with God's people every week? Are we building deep, spiritually friendships with those we love? Have we set apart time to serve Christ in His mission in the world? These questions serve as a kind of diagnostic that reveals the truest desires of our hearts.

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 1-7

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September 22, 2022

God is Gracious

Readings for today: Zechariah 1-7

I love these words from Zechariah 1:2, “Return to Me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you.” It’s an amazingly gracious promise from an amazingly gracious God who never lets go of His promise to love us unconditionally. I have to admit I had a harder time appreciating passages like this when I was younger. Then I had kids of my own. ;-) And like any family, we’ve had our ups and our downs. There have been times when I have been so angry with them like when they lie to me or ignore my rules. But after I’ve cooled down, my deep love and affection for them always returns. I hold them in my arms. I let them know I will never stop loving them. Never stop fighting for them. Never give up on them. It’s in those moments that I often feel a tap on the shoulder from God letting me know that’s exactly how He feels about me.

God has always felt this way about His people. Psalms 30:5 says, “His anger lasts only a moment but His favor lasts a lifetime.” Numbers 14:18 says, “The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and forgiving sin and rebellion.” We see God’s gracious character on display over and over again in our reading today. “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.” (Zech. 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.” (Zech. 2:4) “Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. And the angel said to those who were standing before him, “Remove the filthy garments from him.” And to Joshua he said, “Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments.” (Zech. 3:3-4) Over and over again throughout these chapters, God speaks words of forgiveness and mercy and grace over His people. It’s truly amazing.

And what does God ask in return? He asks us to return to Him. To love Him with all our hearts, minds, and souls. To give Him the honor and glory due His name. What does such love and devotion look like in real life? In the day to day? Listen to what the Lord shares with 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.” (Zech. 7:9-10) Returning to God means repenting of our sin and submitting our lives to Him. True repentance means embracing the ways of God in our lives and refusing to walk in the ways of this world. It means rejecting all the anger, all the hate, all the outrage, all the violence, all the neglect, all the greed, and all the selfishness that consumes so much of our time and attention and energy. It means living for something greater than ourselves…the Kingdom of God. It means loving someone other than ourselves…God and our neighbor. If we will do these things, God promises to dwell in our midst. The nations of the earth will experience revival and we will know the Lord of hosts is with us.

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 8-14

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September 23, 2022

God is with you

Readings for today: Zechariah 8-14

I love these words from Zechariah today, “Thus says the Lord of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.” (Zech. 8:23) Can you imagine? Can you imagine a day where God’s people are so marked by His grace and peace and steadfast love and righteousness and holiness that people from every tribe, tongue, and nation on the earth would lay hold of us just to be in God’s presence? Can you imagine a day when the culture wars cease and the perpetual outrage cycle ends and people turn in exhaustion to those who walk humbly before their God? Can you imagine a day when we lay aside all our selfishness, greed, lust for power, and love of deception and instead cling to those who follow Jesus?

The Apostle Paul says, “All creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons and daughters of God.” (Romans 8:19) The whole world is looking forward to a day when the people of God, filled with the Spirit of God, will answer the call of God and walk in the ways of God to fulfill the mission of God. Read that sentence again to yourself. Read it slowly. Read it carefully. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, the message is clear. The world is waiting for you! The world is waiting for me! The world is groaning under the weight of sin, longing for release! Longing for freedom! Longing for the day when the people of God will take up their mandate once again to care for and steward all God has made, especially the creatures made in His image.

This is God’s plan. He reveals it clearly to His prophet. Over and over again, Zechariah declares the truth of God. Over and over again, Zechariah proclaims the promises of God. The Lord will return to Zion and dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. (Zech. 8:3) The Lord will save His people and gather them from the east and the west to live with Him in Jerusalem. (Zech. 8:7-8) The Lord will return in righteousness, humble and riding a donkey. (Zech. 9:9) The Lord will make His people like jewels in a crown. They shall shine like stars in the land. (Zech. 9:16) The Lord will protect His people. He will make the weak as strong as David. The strong like angels in all their glorious splendor. He will pour out a spirit of grace and mercy upon them. (Zech. 12:8-10) The Lord will do all these things and more as He establishes His reign and rule over all the earth. (Zech. 14:9)

Friends, the message to us could not be more clear. We are to live as citizens of heaven here on earth. The church is created to be a community of life in the midst of a culture of death. We are called to be salt and light in the world. We must live and love and serve and speak in such a way that those around us who do not yet know God will sense His Spirit within us. Today is an opportunity for us to walk with Christ. Today is an opportunity for us to be like Christ. Today is an opportunity for us to share Christ with those around us who do not yet know God so that they too may experience the joy and peace and grace that comes with His abiding presence.

Readings for tomorrow: Esther 1-5

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September 24, 2022

For Such A Time As This…

Readings for today: Esther 1-5

Nothing is new under the sun. Humanity seems perpetually committed to "rinse, wash, repeat" their sinful ways. Today's story from Esther could have just as easily been ripped from our own headlines. Lavish parties. Drunken orgies. Garish displays of wealth and excess. Sexual harassment. Abuse of power. Outrage and anger. Corrupt, political manipulation. Unjust and immoral laws. Plans for mass violence and genocide. We see it all the time. Substitute Ahasuerus for Jeffrey Epstein or Harvey Weinstein or Bill Cosby or Deshaun Watson or Vince McMahon or Mark Driscoll or Ravi Zacharias or numerous Roman Catholic priests or Vladimir Putin or Xi Jinping and you begin to get the point. We are utterly broken. Given the right conditions and access to the right amount of wealth and power and we are capable of just about anything.

Thankfully, God is not blind to our condition. He knows our weak and helpless estate. He knows we are conceived in iniquity and born into sin. He knows sin's power over us. He knows we are enslaved to our basest appetites. This is why He sets apart a people for Himself. He always preserves a remnant in order to save humanity from itself. Esther and Mordecai are just the latest players in the divine drama God has been working out since the beginning of time. They are called "for such a time as this" to serve and protect God's people from annihilation and to confront the pagan powers of this world. It is not an easy call. It doesn't come at a convenient time. It will potentially cost Esther her life should she fail to gain the king's favor. However, Esther knows she is not alone. She knows God is on her side. Though He is never mentioned in the book, the attentive reader sees His presence everywhere like in the days of fasting and prayer Esther calls for as she prepares to go before the king.

Friends, God has not turned His face away from our world. He sees all the pain and suffering. He sees all the injustice and oppression. He sees all the excess and licentiousness. He is deeply aware of the evil that is continually perpetuated by the creatures He made in His own image. This is why He still sets apart a people for Himself. He preserves a faithful remnant He calls the "church" and His purpose is to work through the church to save humanity from itself. We are just the latest players in God's divine drama of salvation. We walk in the footsteps of faithful people like Esther and Mordecai and all those who have gone before us. We are called for "such a time as this" to serve and protect the lost and most vulnerable and to confront the pagan powers of this world. It is not an easy call. It will never come at a convenient time. It will potentially cost us everything, including our very lives. But we are not alone. God is with us. He will never leave us nor forsake us. Even in those moments when we cannot sense His presence, He is at work to bring about His good and perfect will for our lives and for the world.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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September 26, 2022

Divine Reversals

Readings for today: Esther 6-10

At a fundamental level, Esther is a story of divine reversals. God turning things on their heads in order to save His people. Mordechai is lifted up. Haman is brought low. Esther becomes Queen after Vashti is deposed. The Jewish people go from mourning to joy. From defeat to victory. From death to life almost overnight. Purim is inaugurated to commemorate the incredible miracle of God's deliverance and many Jews believe this is the one festival they will continue to celebrate even after Messiah comes.

It is impossible to imagine the emotions behind such a dramatic turn of events. One moment, you are cowering in your home in fear as the mob gathers to bring death and destruction. Local authorities are no help. In fact, they are leading the charge at the king's order. I think of my African-American friends who tell stories about the lynchings they witnessed during the Civil Rights struggle of the 20th century. I think of my South Sudanese friends who live in fear of violent retribution by their own government. I think of my Somali friends who are planting churches under the shadow of Islamic extremism. They know this fear well. It is a constant companion. I think of the women I've met who've suffered abuse, sexual or physical or otherwise. They often feel trapped and alone and afraid. I think of the children I've met who've been violently treated within their own family. I have seen the same fear in their eyes. It is crippling. It is paralyzing. It is dreadful.

But then a new edict is read! A new proclamation is issued! Freedom! Deliverance! Salvation! Think of the joy the Jewish people must have felt, living in the midst of a hostile, pagan empire. They were not helpless! They were not alone! God had raised up a deliverer! A savior! A messiah! In the person of Esther. In the person of Mordechai. God was acting anew to protect His chosen people. Now think of the joy that accompanied the Emancipation Proclamation or the Civil Rights Act in our own time. Think of the joy that accompanied the permanent cease-fire agreement in South Sudan. (The terms of which were unfortunately violated almost immediately...) Think of the joy that comes when entire villages are saved by the gospel and delivered from the influence of Islamic extremism. Think of the joy that comes to a woman when she finally finds the courage to leave her abuser, seek healing and help, and start a new life. Think of the joy that comes to children when they experience love for the first time. These too are Purim.

And what about your life? What about the bondage you have faced or are currently facing? Is it addiction? Is it slavery to sin of some sort? Is it the darkness of depression? The painful affliction of a mental, emotional, or physical illness? Where do you need deliverance today? Where do you need a savior? In what corners of your heart do you still cower in fear? Afraid of what tomorrow may bring? Let Esther's example give you hope! Even at the 11th hour, God is still working to bring salvation!

Readings for tomorrow: Malachi 1-4, Psalm 50

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September 27, 2022

Hard Questions

Readings for today: Malachi 1-4, Psalm 50

We love to make God in our own image. We are so prone to project onto Him our own notions of justice and goodness and righteousness and peace. We struggle to understand a God who would confront us, challenge us, discipline us, say "no" to us. Instead, we challenge Him. We question Him. We put Him on trial because of all the suffering and evil we see in the world. Is it any wonder then that the heavens so often seem closed to our prayers? Is it any wonder then that God seems so distant? Is it any wonder that we struggle so much to hear His voice and experience His abiding presence in our lives?

The people of God have always had this problem. We are constantly putting God to the test. Constantly rationalizing our sin. Constantly justifying our rebellious behavior. Listen again to the many different ways the people of God were challenging God in Malachi's day…

"I have loved you," says the Lord. But you say, "How have You loved us?" (Mal. 1:2)

"A son honors his father and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests, who despise My name. But you say, "How have we despised Your name?" (Mal. 1:6)

"For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts…But you say, "What weariness this is and you snort at it, says the Lord of hosts." (Mal 1:11, 13)

"You have wearied the Lord with your words. But you say, "How have we wearied Him?" (Mal. 2:17)

"Return to Me and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, "How shall we return? Will man rob God?" Yet you are robbing Me. But you say, "How have we robbed you?" (Mal. 3:7-8)

"Your words have been hard against Me, says the Lord. But you say, "How have we spoken against You?" (Mal. 3:13)

Over and over again, the people of God challenge God. Accuse God. Defy God. Ignore God. Demand from God. And the wonder of it all is that God never loses patience. Never lashes out in anger. Never walks away from His people. Instead, He loves them. He is patient with them. He continues to work with them and walk with them in faithfulness. Canonically, Malachi is the final book of the Old Testament and the final words from the final book set up the opening act of the New Testament. "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction." (Mal. 4:5-6) Fast forward a few hundred years and a man named John the Baptist begins preaching repentance in the wilderness. His self-proclaimed mission is to "prepare the way of the Lord." He is Elijah reborn, come to make way for the Messiah. Emmanuel. God with us.

God is amazing. He never gives up on us despite all our questions and doubts and fears and failures. He perseveres with us through every trial and temptation. He holds onto us in all our pain and heartache and suffering. He walks with us through the darkest valleys of life. All He asks in return is that we trust Him. Believe Him. Turn to Him. Draw near to Him. Walk with Him. Surrender to Him. He knows what's best. He knows the way. And if we will let Him, He will lead us on paths of righteousness for His names' sake.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 7-10

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September 28, 2022

Overcoming Cultural Distance

Readings for today: Ezra 7-10

Today's reading definitely presents a challenge. Particularly since we are so far removed from the specific cultural situation Ezra faced as the Israelites returned from exile. It is deeply offensive to our 21st century Western cultural sensibilities to imagine a group of men initiating a mass divorce over race and/or nationality. We rightly wonder what happens to the women and children who are kicked to the curb? Are they left destitute? Is this of the will of God? Was this an example of early Pharisaism rearing it's ugly head? Zealousness for the Law of God taken to a logical extreme? Moreover, many wonder if this is yet another example of God's Law remaining culturally bound? Irrelevant to our modern lives? After all, how can we respect a God who commands the breakup of so many families?

This is what makes Bible reading such a challenge. We can't just read the words on the page and accept them at face value. We have to work hard to overcome the cultural distance between ourselves and the text. We have to dive deeper to understand the cultural currents of the day and how this story fits if we want to understand. Furthermore, we have to acknowledge the cultural assumptions we ourselves bring to the text. We are not objective observers. We too have biases and perspectives that are shaped by current cultural movements like #MeToo, feminism, and, at a more fundamental level, the US Bill of Rights. These things will shape how we respond to the text and make it incredibly difficult as we try to walk a mile in Ezra's shoes.

So why was Ezra so upset over the intermarriage of Israel with their pagan neighbors? And why does he call for them to "put aside" the foreign women and their children? And what were the social ramifications of such a drastic move? First and foremost, we need to understand that in Ancient Near East culture, ethnicity, tribal identity, and religion all overlapped. You see something similar in the world today where Islam is so closely identified with an Arabic ethnicity. Tribal kingdoms in the ancient world were defined in a very real sense by the god they worshipped. Each nation had their own god and their own unique religious practices. Their god ruled over a specific territorial boundary which defined the geographic limits of a particular kingdom. Other features that defined tribal and/or national identity had to do with the personality of the king who ruled, the language they spoke, and then, downstream from the rest, the particular physical features of the people themselves. One can see how different this is from modern racial theory forged in the 19th century to support chattel slavery, ethnic purges, and eventually the Holocaust.

From a Biblical standpoint, if one married a pagan, one pledged allegiance in a certain sense to their god. This obviously represents a fundamental break with the First Commandment which is why Ezra reacts so strongly to the news. Furthermore, intermarriage also brought into question one's tribal and/or national identity and allegiance. It was an open question whether one could actually be an Israelite if one married a non-Israelite. One would always be suspect as would one's children. If/when an invasion took place, whose side would you be on? Could you be trusted? All these were real, practical questions for a fragile group of people seeking to reestablish themselves and rebuild their nation. Certainly there were options for non-Israelites to become Israelites. The book of Ruth is a great example and a story the people in Ezra's time would have known well. However, in order to become an Israelite one had to renounce any connection to their former god and their former people. "Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16)

Hopefully, this helps us understand Ezra's dilemma and heartbreak. He is ashamed. He is afraid. He knows his history well and he knows what happens when God's people are unfaithful. "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt. And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today." (Ezra 9:6-7) He tears his robe. He rips his beard. He falls on his face before God and intercedes for the people.

As he prays, a few men come forward with a solution. What if everyone who has taken a foreign wife puts her aside? What if they separated out the foreign women and children as an act of repentance? This seems good to Ezra. The proclamation goes forth. Those found guilty repent. And the story ends. We don't know how it turns out for the women and children. Are they simply cast side? Left to fend for themselves? Surely not as God's Law is just as clear about how we treat the foreigner and stranger, the orphan and widow, and the most vulnerable in our midst.

So what happened? No one can say with certainty. I can only here offer a modern day analogy. In many places in Africa, it is common for the men to take more than one wife. Polygamy is not God's design for marriage so I've encouraged them to choose one wife and essentially "put away" the others. They remain in the household under the economic care and protection of the man of the house but he lives in covenant faithfulness with only one woman. He provides for them. He takes care of their children. He still fulfills all his responsibilities as a husband and father so they are not left destitute on the streets. It's not a perfect solution but it is one offered in an attempt to bring the family into covenant faithfulness to the gospel.

So what do we takeaway from a passage like this? Well, think about your own life. What does covenant faithfulness look like for you? Where are you living in covenant obedience? Where are you living in disobedience? Is your heart grieved by the brokenness and sin of your life? What do you need to confess before your Heavenly Father today? Where do you need His grace to cover your sin?

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 1-4

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September 29, 2022

Power of Prayer

Readings for today: Nehemiah 1-4

What is your first response when facing a crisis? What is your initial instinct when you receive bad news? When life seems to be falling apart, what do you turn to? For many, it is alcohol or drugs. Opioids. Marijuana. Psychedelics. All are readily available in my community. For many, it is sex. Porn. Tinder. Hook-up apps. All pose very real temptations to those who in need of a "fix." For many, it is work. Longer hours. Longer days. More gratification. More achievement. More success. It can be intoxicating. However, all these behaviors only postpone the inevitable. At some point in time, we have to face our fear. We have to enter the darkness. We have to deal with the heartbreak and pain.

Nehemiah receives the worst news imaginable. He had asked about his people. How many had survived? How many were still living in Jerusalem? What was life like for them? The news was grim. The people were helpless. Vulnerable. Weak. They were barely hanging on. Without a wall to protect them, there was no way they would survive. So how does Nehemiah respond? With prayer and fasting. Weeping and mourning before the Lord for days. Many would argue he's wasting valuable time. He should use his position of influence to get what he needs to save his people. He should run to the king immediately to let him know what's happening. Why waste time in prayer? Surely God understands! And can't Nehemiah pray along the way? Why now? Why wait? When there's so much work to be done?

We live in a busy world. A world that puts the pedal to the metal 24/7. A world that sets a relentless pace. It is easy to get caught up in the race. It is easy to pull up anchor and let yourself be driven by all the activities and opportunities the world puts in front of us. It's easy to go from crisis to crisis without ever stopping to ask why? Why am I trying so hard? Why am I running so hard? What am I trying to avoid? Who am I trying to impress? What's the cost? Prayer forces us to slow down. It forces us to sit in the Lord's presence and wait for His Word. Prayer silences the cacophony of voices that fill our head every single day. Or at least quiets them for a few moments. Prayer brings us in touch with what is truly real and noble and true and allows us to identify the lies we so often believe. Prayer gives time for wisdom to sink in. For plans to be made. For actions to be mapped out.

Consider again the example of Nehemiah. After praying and fasting for days, he wipes his tears and resumes his post as cupbearer before the king. The king sensed his mood however and asked him what was wrong. Nehemiah clearly had prepared for this moment. When asked, he laid out his concern and his plan. "I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it." And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy." And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me." (Nehemiah 2:3-8) Nehemiah left nothing to chance. In prayer, he had sought the wisdom and counsel of God. He waited for days until the Lord revealed His will. He emptied himself through fasting in order that he may receive. And God

was faithful. God gave him a plan to present to the king. Furthermore, because Nehemiah appealed to God first, God gave him favor when it came time to appeal to the king.

Too often prayer is an afterthought. A last resort. Something we do when it's time to "break glass in case of emergency." Too often we look at prayer as a passive exercise. We assume it is a way of avoiding hard work or hard conversations. We don't value prayer as we should. Instead, we are people of action. We want to move and move now! We want to act and act now! We demand instant gratification and instant success and instant feedback. Especially in a social media world. But prayer is vital to the life of a believer. It slows us down. It calms us down. It gives us perspective. All good things in our world today!

What's your prayer life like? Do you make time to pray each day? What do you pray for? Wisdom? Understanding? Insight? Strength? Peace? All these things and more are available to you through our Heavenly Father. All you have to do is ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened.

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 5-7

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September 30, 2022

Punching Down

Readings for today: Nehemiah 5-7

I am the oldest of three boys. Growing up, we spent a lot of time together. Most of it good. Most of it fun. We remain close to this day. However, we had our moments. There were times we'd get frustrated with each other. Times we'd fight and get into it. Times we'd get in trouble or get busted for doing things we shouldn't. That's when mom or dad would step in and level consequences. As the oldest I often bore the brunt of the punishment. This bred a certain amount of resentment which I would proceed to take out on my younger brother and he would, in turn, take out his resentment on our youngest brother and he would, in turn, take out his resentment on our dog. ;-) Just kidding. In all seriousness, though, human beings are like that. We have a tendency to punch down. To exploit those who are weaker than us. Take advantage of those who have less power than us. To take out our own anger and bitterness and frustration on those who do not have the ability to retaliate.

Consider what happens in our text today. The people who returned to Jerusalem do not have it easy. They engage in back-breaking work day after day as they try to scrape out an existence in a city that lies in ruins. Due to their lack of a protective wall, they live under constant threat of attack. Despite their return from exile, they are not free. They live and serve at the pleasure of a pagan empire. All of this stress and pressure built resentment and bitterness in people which caused them to turn inward. To focus on controlling what they could control. So those with power - like the nobles and officials - did what they could to line their own pockets. They punched down against their brothers and sisters, exploiting the poor and powerless among them. Fields were mortgaged. Loans were taken out. Economic slavery ensued.

Thankfully, Nehemiah was a godly leader. A man who sought the Lord with all his heart. He did not "punch down" when given the opportunity but instead did all he could to build others up. From the time he was appointed governor in the land of Judah, he refused to take the food allowance. He rejected the oppressive practices of those who had served as governor before him. He persevered in his work on the wall in a valiant attempt to protect the most vulnerable. He acquired no land. He was inclusive as a leader, inviting 150 different officials to feast with him at his own expense. He was generous. He was magnanimous. All because he feared the Lord and wanted to bring honor and glory to His great name.

Nehemiah's example is a powerful one. He shows us in real time what a life looks like that is lived for God. He cares nothing for the riches of this world. He cares nothing for temporal, earthly power. He cares nothing for the benefits and privileges he's been given. He walks with open hands before the Lord. He walks with a pure heart before the Lord. He keeps his eyes fixed on the mission God has called him to and he is blessed as a result. What would that look like in my life? In your life? What would change if we kept our eyes fixed on Jesus and worked for His eternal rewards? What would happen if we held onto all we have loosely and walked with open hands before the Lord? Like Nehemiah, we would become conduits of blessing to our families, friends, co-workers, and community.

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 8-10

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October 1, 2022

God's Story, Our Story

Readings for today: Nehemiah 8-10

Creation. Abraham. Egypt. Exodus. Judges. Promised Land. Kings. Temple. Priests. Prophets. Exile. Return. Whenever the people of God renew their covenant with the Lord, they take time to remember their story. They understood their current situation was but the latest link in a chain of events stretching all the way back to the Garden. All the way back to God Himself at the dawn of creation. But for God, they would have been destroyed. But for God, they would have been erased. But for God, there would be no history. No story to tell. Listen to them tell it again and think about how far they've come...

"You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you. You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. You found his heart faithful before you, and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite. And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous. "And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted arrogantly against our fathers. And you made a name for yourself, as it is to this day. And you divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on dry land, and you cast their pursuers into the depths, as a stone into mighty waters. By a pillar of cloud you led them in the day, and by a pillar of fire in the night to light for them the way in which they should go. You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, and you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant. You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them. "But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, 'This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,' and had committed great blasphemies, you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell. "And you gave them kingdoms and peoples and allotted to them every corner. So they took possession of the land of Sihon king of Heshbon and the land of Og king of Bashan. You multiplied their children as the stars of heaven, and you brought them into the land that you had told their fathers to enter and possess. So the descendants went in and possessed the land, and you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of the land, that they might do with them as they would. And they captured fortified cities and a rich land, and took possession of houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchards and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness. "Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them

back to you, and they committed great blasphemies. Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. And in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies. But after they had rest they did evil again before you, and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them. Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you delivered them according to your mercies. And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear. Therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. "Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day. Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them. Even in their own kingdom, and amid your great goodness that you gave them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you or turn from their wicked works. Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress.” (Nehemiah 9:6-37)

Those of you who have been tracking with us through the Bible this year know these stories. You’ve read them in great detail. You’ve pondered them. You’ve prayed over them. You’ve listened for the voice of God in them. Some of you grew frustrated at times. You couldn’t understand why they kept making the same mistakes. Others of you got angry at times. You couldn’t understand the righteous judgment of God. Many of you laughed and cried and wrestled and struggled with the lessons the people were learning. About themselves. About their God. About His plan and His future.

It’s important for us to remember this story. To read it over and over again for it is our story as well. As Christians, we are grafted into this story. Adopted into this family. Warts and all. These people are our people. They are our mothers and fathers. Sisters and brothers in the faith. And we are so like them. If we’re honest with ourselves, we too make the same mistakes over and over again. We too sin and fall short of the glory of God. We too deserve judgment and death. Punishment and exile. But we have the benefit of living after Christ. Jesus Christ took the punishment we deserved. He went into exile for us. He endured the righteous wrath of God on our behalf. He stood in our place just as surely as He stands in the place of the Old Testament saints who came before us. He is Savior of the world. Past. Present. Future. He is the Alpha and Omega. The Beginning and the End. His blood is sufficient to cover every sin. As we head into the New Testament, we must hold onto our history. Christ came as the climax of this history. He is the One to whom the Old Testament points. He is the One in whom all prophecies are fulfilled. He is the One every single saint from Abraham forward looked to by faith. May we look to Him as well!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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October 3, 2022

A Futile Hope

Readings for today: Nehemiah 11-13, Psalm 126

I grew up watching Star Wars as a kid and it is generally accepted that The Empire Strikes Back is the best of the original trilogy, if not the best in the entire series. It's a very dark movie. Evil is on the move and in fact, seems to be winning. The end of this second installment finds the heroes in disarray. Luke Skywalker has lost a hand and his innocence as he finds out Darth Vader is his father. Han Solo has been captured and frozen in carbon so he can be delivered to Jabba the Hut. Leia, Chewbacca, the droids, and Lando aren't quite sure what to do and the hopes of the rebellion seem very slim. It's all a set up of course. The final installment of the series will see the heroes overcome all these obstacles to win an improbable victory against a seemingly invincible enemy. Stop me if this plot seems familiar at all.

The Old Testament doesn't end well. It doesn't matter if you read it canonically (Genesis - Malachi) or chronologically as we have done this year. The bottom line is the same. Israel is in disarray. Despite their return to the Promised Land, they simply cannot get it right. They are unable to remain faithful. They intermarry. They profane the Sabbath. They worship other gods. It's enough to drive us to despair. And that's the point. Throughout the Old Testament, God is at work bringing us to the end of ourselves. The end of our strength. The end of our resources. The end of our wisdom so we will cry out to Him. He's preparing His people for the coming of the Savior. Because it is impossible for us to remain faithful, He must do it for us. Because it is impossible for us to obey God's Law, He must do it for us. Because the sacrifices are only temporary, Jesus must become the perfect sacrifice on our behalf. Hanging between heaven and earth. Representing both God and humanity. He intercedes for us even as He takes our place.

If you are wired like me, you find the end of the Old Testament incredibly unsatisfying. It goes over like a lead balloon. A wet blanket. It just leaves a bad taste in your mouth. The reason I feel this way is because deep down I want to believe I can be a good person. Deep down I want to believe that if I work hard enough, stay disciplined enough, read the Bible enough, pray enough, worship enough, you name it; I can work my way to God. I can find favor with Him. I can earn His praise. But Ephesians 2:8-9 confronts me with the truth, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." Saved by grace. Saved through faith which is itself a gift from God. None of my works matter in the grand scheme of things because God will not allow me to boast in anything except Christ.

We've spent nine months in the Old Testament. It's a long, hard slog no doubt. We have watched the same pattern repeat itself over and over again. God raises up His people only to watch them fall into sin. Adam and Eve. Noah and his family. Abraham and Sarah. Moses and the Exodus. Joshua and the Judges. Samuel and Saul. David and Bathsheba. On and on the list goes until you get to Ezra, Nehemiah and the Exiles. All of them sin and fall short of the glory of God. All of them are like sheep who have gone astray. All of them unworthy of anything but God's judgment. So how does God respond?

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

Readings for tomorrow: Psalm 106, John 1:4-14

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October 4, 2022

God's Answer to Our Deepest Cry

Readings for today: Psalm 106, John 1:4-14

Over the last 10+ years, I have been blessed to travel the world. I have been to China, South Korea, Japan, Mexico, Israel, Jordan, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Uganda. I have met men and women from South Sudan, North Korea, Iraq, Palestinian territories, Somalia, Djibouti, Cambodia, and a host of other nations. They all speak different languages. They all belong to different tribes. They all come from different cultures. But as I've listened to them share their stories, there is a common thread. A common cry that arises from the depths of every human heart. It doesn't seem to matter if one holds to a particular faith tradition or not. It's a cry for salvation. A cry for deliverance from all the evil and suffering in our world.

Listen to how an ancient song-writer once put it, "Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us from among the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise." (Psalm 106:47) After cataloging all the different ways his people shamed, disobeyed, and rejected God, the Psalmist also is quick to remind his readers of the many ways God had saved them. He is confident not in the faithfulness of his own people but in the faithfulness of God which He demonstrates throughout their shared history. This is a great lead-in to the New Testament and the reading from the Gospel of John where the most marvelous thing takes place. A miracle much greater than the parting of the Red Sea. A promise much greater than the Promised Land. A salvation much greater than the temporary respites won against their enemies. God has indeed looked on their distress. God has indeed heard their cry. For their sake and for the sake of all those who would come after them, God remembers His covenant and acts in accordance to His steadfast love.

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

Friends, this is the central mystery of the Christian faith. Christ was born. Christ has died. Christ was risen. Christ will come again. The mystery of the incarnation - God literally taking on human flesh and human nature to become one of us - is God's great answer to the deepest cries of our hearts. He comes to be with us. He comes to meet us in our suffering. He comes to sit with us in the dust and ashes of our lives. God is faithful and true. He will not override the freedom He instilled in us at the dawn of creation. He will not abrogate the authority He gave us when He made us stewards over all He has made. This world has been entrusted into our care. The pain and suffering of this world is a result of the many, many choices human beings have made throughout history. Stacking sin upon sin, we are constantly reaping what we have sown. Nation rages against nation. Tribe rages against tribe. Clan against clan. Family against family. This is the story of the human race and yet God refuses to let us go. He refuses to abandon us to our fate. He willingly enters human history to become one of us, die for us, rise for us, and show us a different way. He willingly enters the heart of "all who would receive Him, who believe in His name" and He gives them the right to be called His children. Children not born of blood or of the flesh but of the will of God.

God has stayed true to His plan. He has come to save us from ourselves. He has come to set us free from our captivity to our basest desires and instincts. He has come to deliver us from evil… primarily the evil that reside within each one of us. He has come to offer us life and that life is the light of all humanity. It shines in the darkness of our world and great news of the gospel is that the darkness can never overcome it!

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 1, Luke 1:1-2:38

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October 5, 2022

The Calling of God

Readings for today: Matthew 1, Luke 1:1-2:38

There's a church in Israel built over the top of Zechariah's home. It's in the hill country of Judah. It commemorates the place where Mary and Elizabeth met after receiving the incredible news that their two boys would change the world. I love the statue pictured above. It's a beautiful depiction of both women, both pregnant, marveling at all God had done for them. They were the most unlikely participants in God's divine drama. One woman, Elizabeth, barren and advanced in years past the point of ever getting pregnant. Another woman, Mary, still very much a teenager, unmarried, and a virgin. Both women receive an angelic visitation from Gabriel who "stands in the presence of God" and is sent to deliver the good news of John and Jesus' births. Both women are overshadowed by the Holy Spirit as their wombs are blessed with the miracle of new life.

And what a life they were given! Their boys would be great before the Lord. One would be filled with the Holy Spirit from conception. His call would be to turn the hearts of of the children of Israel back to God. He preach in the spirit and power of Elijah and he would prepare the way for his cousin who would be called Son of the Most High. He would be conceived by the Holy Spirit and would be given the throne of David in order to reign over the house of Jacob forever. He would be called holy and the Son of God. The first of these two boys would be named John. The second would be named Jesus. One can only imagine the conversations Elizabeth and Mary had during the three months Mary stayed with them.

It's tempting to read these stories and believe that these women were somehow different than us. More holy. More righteous. More special in some way. Nothing could be further from the truth. God simply chose them to play a particular role in His great salvation plan. You and I have been called to play particular roles as well. Roles only we can play. Roles specifically suited for our unique mix of personality, passion, and ability. Yes, we may not receive angelic visitations but the call of God comes to us just the same. It comes through His Word and in prayer. It comes to us through our brothers and sisters in Christ. It comes to us as we survey the great needs of the world around us. And those whom God calls, God equips. Those whom God calls, He qualifies. He sends His Holy Spirit to "overshadow" all the work we do in His name. Friends, if you trust in Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, you have been called and invited to play a vital role in God's salvation plan! God wants to use YOU to help bring about His Kingdom on this earth! Seek His wisdom so you may know not only what your role may be but how best to fulfill that role in your life.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 2, Luke 2:39-52

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October 6, 2022

Reaction to Jesus

Readings for today: Matthew 2, Luke 2:39-52

Jesus evokes the strongest of reactions. Wise men from the east. Probably pagan astrologers who watched the skies over Babylon. Men who possibly had been raised on the stories of their fabled Jewish forebears, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, come to Israel following a star. The heavenly sign was so compelling they traveled who knows how many miles over how many weeks to worship and offer gifts to a newborn king.

Jesus evokes the strongest of reactions. The king of Israel. Descendent of Esau through his father who had converted, Herod was raised a Jew. However, he was not of the Davidic line and therefore was a pretender at best to the throne. Furthermore, he reigned at the whim of Caesar, his first allegiance being to the Roman Empire rather than Yahweh. He received the news the wise men brought and was troubled. The news of a new king being born would be a threat to his own power. So he marshals his forces and lays waste to the entire region surrounding Bethlehem, killing all the male children under two years of age.

Jesus evokes the strongest of reactions. Joseph and Mary are traveling home from their annual trek to Jerusalem. After they make camp for the night, they realize Jesus is not with them. He has remained behind. So back they go frantic in their search for their now 12 year old son. For three days, they searched high and low throughout the city only to find him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions. “Why have you treated us like this?” Why disrespect us? Why not obey us? Why did you not come when it was time to go? Their anger and frustration is palpable. And Jesus humbles himself and returns with them to Nazareth.

Jesus evokes the strongest of reactions. The Heavenly Father looks down on His Son. Sees Him in danger in Bethlehem and sends an angel to warn his parents to flee the coming massacre. Sees him at the Temple listening and learning from the teachers of the Law. Sees him as he grows up under the love and guidance of Joseph and Mary. The Father sees it all and grants the Son favor. Blessing. Wisdom. Strength. Preparing him for the day when he would launch his ministry. Laying the groundwork for what’s to come.

What’s your reaction to Jesus? How do you receive Him? Is it with a glad heart? Do you feel yourself compelled to seek Him and grow a relationship with Him like the wise men? Is it fear? Do you, like Herod, respond in fear and anxiety to the idea that Jesus would be your Lord and Savior? Is it frustration? Like Joseph and Mary, does Jesus sometimes confound your expectations? Or do you respond with love and devotion? Is Jesus finding greater “favor” with you with each passing year?

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 3, Mark 1:1-11, Luke 3, John 1:15-34

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October 7, 2022

John the Baptist

Readings for today: Matthew 3, Mark 1:1-11, Luke 3, John 1:15-34

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction." (Malachi 4:5-6)

John the Baptist is one of the most fascinating figures in all the Bible. He is Elijah reborn. The one whom Malachi prophesied would prefigure the coming of the Messiah. He is the messenger. The final Old Testament prophet. Like the prophets of old, he lives an ascetic lifestyle. He dwells in the desert. Survives on locusts and wild honey. Wears clothing made from wild camel hide. From birth, he was set apart as a Nazarite which meant no wine touched his lips nor would he cut his hair. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and he was sent to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

John preached a message of repentance. In keeping with his prophetic forebears, he pulled no punches. He showed no fear. In the face of political and religious opposition, he spoke the truth. He called out the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. He called out the immoral behavior of Herod the tetrarch. He called out the sins of the people as they came to be baptized. He called them to obedience. Called them to surrender. To sacrifice. To devote their lives to Yahweh. And revival began sweeping the region.

God called John to serve a very special purpose. Though it meant prison. Though it would eventually cost him his life. John was called to prepare the way for Jesus. To make His path straight. To lift up every valley. To tear down every mountain. To straighten out the crooked and smooth the rough edges. He was called to lay the groundwork for the ministry of the Messiah so that all people might see the salvation of God. His calling was not to fame. Fortune. Safety. Security. Comfort. Peace. As soon as his ministry gets rolling, he hands it off. As soon as he is becoming popular, Jesus shows up on the scene. As soon as he really starts getting traction, he steps aside.

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29) This is our calling as well. To step aside. To get out of the limelight. To do all we can to point everyone to Christ. It may not make us popular. It may not gain us fame or fortune or a good reputation. It may cost us some of our rights. Some of our freedoms. Some of us may indeed be put in prison. Some of us indeed may lose our lives. (Not necessarily here in America but certainly in many places around the world.) The calling John received from God has been given to the church. To preach the good news of the gospel to the ends of the earth. To call people to repentance before the Lord. To call people to surrender their lives to Jesus before it’s too late. Before the day of judgment comes. Before the ax is laid to the root of the tree and the wicked are cut off. We too must make straight the path for Jesus. We too must lift up every valley. Tear down every mountain. Straighten out the crooked and smooth over the rough edges. In short, we must do all we can to remove every barrier to Christ. We must ourselves get out of the way so that others will see Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 4:1-22, 13:54-58, Mark 1:12-20, Mark 6:1-6, Luke 4:1-30, 5:1-11, John 1:35-51, 2:1-12

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October 8, 2022

Temptation

Readings for today: Matthew 4:1-22, 13:54-58, Mark 1:12-20, Mark 6:1-6, Luke 4:1-30, 5:1-11, John 1:35-51, 2:1-12

One of the more powerful experiences of my recent trip to Israel was visiting the Mount of Temptation. Tradition holds this is where the Spirit drove Jesus after His baptism. It's located in the hills outside of Jericho in a desolate region of the country. For centuries, many devout believers have come to this mountain to live as hermits. They come to dedicate their lives to fasting and prayer. You can see some of the original caves in the mountainside. You can even visit a Greek Orthodox Monastery that was built on the slopes overlooking both Jericho and the Jordan River valley. Some of the structures date back to the 6th century and supposedly at it's heart lies the very cave where Jesus spent His forty days and forty nights.

I took the journey all the way into the heart of the monastery to see the place where Jesus is said to have been tempted. I stood in front of the stone where He sat and looked out the window. I tried to imagine myself in this dry, deserted place without food or water for forty days. I looked at the stones on the mountainside and thought to myself, "These stones? These are the stones He could have made into bread?" I looked out at Jericho to the place where Herod the Great built his winter palace and thought to myself, "This is the kind of power and authority the devil offered Jesus if He simply would fall down and worship him?" I thought of the Temple complex in Jerusalem where the devil tempted Jesus to make a spectacle of Himself and again was struck by the humility and trust and dependence of Jesus. He truly trusted His Father to provide for all His needs. He truly sought the affirmation of His Father above all earthly praise. He truly believed in His Father's plan for His life.

What about me? Do I trust Jesus in the same way? How do I respond when temptation comes? Am I willing to fast and pray and place myself and my future in my Father's hands? Am I humble enough to admit my brokenness before Him? Trusting enough to let Him guide and direct my steps? Dependent enough to surrender my will and my life and my hopes and my dreams into His hands? All these questions ran though my mind that day. I don't know that I came to any hard and fast answers but I did find comfort in reciting Jesus' words to myself. Claiming His promises and protection for my life. "Do not live by bread alone, Doug, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Do not try to satisfy your every longing but instead let those longings remind you of your even greater longing for God. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test, Doug." Do not presume upon His grace. Do not take His love for granted. "Worship the Lord your God, Doug, and serve Him alone." Make God the supreme treasure of your life and prioritize accordingly. In this way, you will find yourself resisting every temptation the enemy might throw your way.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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October 10, 2022

Signs and Wonders

Readings for today: Matthew 4:23-25, 8:14-17, Mark 1:21-39, Luke 4:31-44

I have felt for a few years now that we are seeing the beginnings of a tsunami of pain that is just starting to hit our shores. More and more families are breaking down. Our children are suffering from increasing rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation. Our culture is filled with an increasing amount of rage and anger. Death threats are now common against those with whom we disagree. It seems like everything is taken to the extreme. It makes for a very hostile and dangerous environment. Of course it must be acknowledged that what seems new to many of us has been the normative experience for so many of our friends of color or members of the LGBTQ community. They have lived with these threats for decades or more. But is this all there is? Are we doomed to live our lives in a never ending cycle of self-destruction? Constantly drawing and re-drawing our boundaries ever tighter in order to protect those we love? Isolating ourselves more and more from the complexities of the world in order to stay safe? Or is there a different way? A more excellent way?

First century culture in Palestine was little different than our own. Pharisees. Saduccees. Essenes. Herodians. Roman collaborators. It was a divided society where different religious/political factions dotted the landscape. Each vying for power. Each seeking supremacy so they could eradicate their opposition. This was the world into which Jesus was born. It was a world full of violence and pain. A world full of life-threatening poverty and deprivation. A world where death was a daily companion. This was the world in which Jesus launched his ministry. And what a ministry it was! So different than all the rest! Jesus welcomed the outcast. Ate with sinners. Spent time with the ritually unclean. He lifted up women. He cleansed lepers. He restored the isolated and lonely to community. As His fame grew, many people came from all over to bring Him their sick. Their diseased. Their hurting. Their wounded. The demon-possessed were set free. He healed all their afflictions. These were the signs and wonders of a new kind of Kingdom being born. A new kind of King had come into the world. And these were just the "edges of His ways." (Job 26:14)

Jesus said those who followed Him would do even greater works than He…is that even possible? Can you fathom a world where the church builds on the work Jesus began? What if the church made it her aim to serve her community? Going out each and every week - having been filled and equipped in worship - to share the good news of the gospel? Bring healing in Jesus' name? Freedom in Jesus' name? Hope in Jesus' name? What if the church was known as a refuge? A place of safety and security amidst the turmoil and violence of our world? What if the church was known for love rather than hate? Authenticity and honesty rather than hypocrisy? Would not the fame of Jesus increase? Would not people be drawn to the care and comfort we provide? What if we laid aside our internal theological fights and squabbles and instead linked arms to serve? What if we stopped stabbing our wounded in the back and instead embraced grace as a way of life? What if we put aside our need for political influence and power and instead sought to prayerfully and thoughtfully engage across the political spectrum? And what stops us? Why not start right now? Even today?

Friends, true followers of Jesus should be known more by what they're for than what they're against. Jesus was certainly against many things in his day but he was known for his love and compassion and ministry among the poor. The outcast. The sinner. What is your church known for? And how can you - as a member of that local church - represent Christ more faithfully today?

Readings for tomorrow: John 3-5

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October 11, 2022

Humility

Readings for today: John 3-5

I grew up the "hero" of an alcoholic family system. For those who may be unfamiliar with family systems theory, it's the idea that everyone within a dysfunctional family plays a particular role. Each individual role is designed consciously or subconsciously to help the individual cope with the shame of the brokenness of the particular system. In my family's case, it was the shame of alcoholism and since I was the hero, I attempted to draw everyone's attention away from the source of our shame by over-achieving. I did my best to be perfect. I wanted to prove to everyone how I had escaped the system. Overcome the shame. Achieved success despite my background. The result was deep insecurity covered over by an inflated ego.

Naturally, I brought this with me into my work as a pastor. The "hero" mentality in me feasted on the help I was able to provide, the success I had in leading churches, and the praise I received for my pastoral work. This led me to try even harder and achieve even more and I soon found myself burning out. I went to a counselor. He asked me a question in our first session that hit my like a ton of bricks, "Who are you trying to impress, Doug?" For the first time, I began to question my approach to life. Who was I trying to impress? Why was I trying so hard? Why did I live with such deep insecurity? I wish I could say I found answers to these questions right away but it took me several more years and a truly brutal 19 months in Wisconsin to figure things out. God humbled me in Wisconsin in ways that can't be expressed in words. He broke me utterly. He crucified my ego. He exposed my empty ambitions and vain conceit. He stripped my life down to the studs. Took away all I held dear. Made me the "villain" in my own story and helped me see my desperate need for grace. It was like a 2nd conversion. It was like I was born again…again.

I think this is why I love John the Baptist so much. He has absolute clarity about the real "Hero" of the story. It's not him. Despite his popularity and fame, he recognizes he is simply a witness. A man called to prepare the way for someone greater than himself. Yes, he has launched a successful ministry. One that changed the lives of who knows how many people. But he recognizes this is not his own work but the work of the Father. "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven." (John 3:27) So when his disciples come to him to complain about the growing popularity of Jesus, John's answer is easy. "He must increase and I must decrease." (John 3:30) John knows he is the not the bridegroom. He is like the best man, rejoicing greatly to see the bridegroom and hear His voice. Having seen the fulfillment of God's promise in Jesus, John's joy is now complete. His work is done. It is enough. He is content.

One of my favorite quotes comes from the founder of the Moravians. A man by the name of the Count Nicolaus von Zinzendorf. He is reputed to have once said, "Preach the gospel. Die. Be forgotten." I love it. It expresses with clarity the greatest desire of my heart. No matter how significant my influence, how large my church, how successful my ministry, how faithful I am over years of ministry, when I finally retire or pass on I want no one to remember my name. I want no one to give me any credit for what I have done. I have received nothing except that which God has placed in my hands. I have accomplished nothing except through Christ and by His Spirit. I have done nothing worth mentioning except that which God has taken and multiplied many times over. I am simply a vessel through which He does His work. A servant who serves at His pleasure. A lump of clay He has molded for His purposes. May He increase to such an extent in my life that I am completely obscured by His glory and all the credit goes to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 8:1-4, 9:1-17, 12:1-21, Mark 1:40-45, 2:1-3:21, Luke 5:12-6:19

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October 12, 2022

Mercy over Sacrifice

Readings for today: Matthew 8:1-4, 9:1-17, 12:1-21, Mark 1:40-45, 2:1-3:21, Luke 5:12-6:19

“Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous but sinners.” (Matt. 9:12-13)

This is what I love most about Jesus. He absolutely loves sinners. He loves the lost. He loves the wandering. He loves the confused. He loves the doubter. He loves the questioner. He loves the hurting. He loves the broken. He loves the oppressed. He loves the enslaved. He loves the imprisoned. He loves all those who find themselves struggling with unbelief. He not only loves them but He comes to be with them. He comes to heal them. He comes to rescue them. He comes to deliver them. He comes to set them free. He comes to reclaim them. He comes to redeem them. He will never rest until He chases down every single person who is lost and brings them home again. This is His heart and we see it on full display in today’s reading.

Jesus is the Great Physician. He has come to heal the great sickness infecting all of humanity. He knows sin is more than what we do or say or think. It is a disease that corrupts all it touches. A pervasive power at work inside us, poisoning our very souls. It is a terminal illness we cannot escape. A pandemic for which we have no effective treatment. Thankfully, Jesus sees our helpless condition. Jesus knows the hopeless condition into which we are born. And He alone has the power to heal us. Even more importantly, Jesus wants to heal us. It is the great desire of His heart. It is the fundamental reason behind why He came.

Can you imagine what might happen if the followers of Jesus became known more for mercy rather than right sacrifice? Known more for love of sinners rather than condemnation? Known more for compassion towards those who are lost and wandering, doubting and deconstructing than judgment? This is Jesus’ call to us today. As we go about our daily lives, we meet all kinds of people. Lepers, paralytics, tax collectors, sinners, Sabbath-keepers and Sabbath-breakers, Pharisees, scribes, men and women with withered hands and withered souls. How do we respond to them? Do we treat them with the dignity and love they deserve as human beings made in the image of God? Do we have compassion on their helpless and hopeless estate? Are we willing to extend grace and mercy and embrace them as Jesus did? Pray for God to open your eyes to truly see the spiritual condition of those around you. Pray for God to fill your heart with His love and compassion so you might minister to their deepest needs. Pray for opportunities to introduce them to the Great Physician who longs to heal them and make them whole.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 5-7, Luke 6:20-49, 11:1-13

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October 13, 2022

Building a Strong Foundation

Readings for today: Matthew 5-7, Luke 6:20-49, 11:1-13

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you? Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great.” (Luke 6:46-49)

The Sermon on the Mount is the greatest sermon ever preached. Period. In it, Jesus casts His vision for His Kingdom. He defines what life looks like under His rule and reign. He sets boundaries around human desire and behavior to protect us from self-destruction and to teach us how to build a life that will last forever. Sadly, too many of us believe we can choose our own path. Defiantly, we try to chart our own course into eternity. Foolishly, we attempt to bushwhack our way through the wilderness of this world only to quickly lose our way. The results are tragic and heartbreaking.

I wonder sometimes why we find our culture’s pact with sin and death so enticing. What is it about our culture that draws us in? We all know it’s not good for us. We all know the pace we set isn’t healthy. We all feel the effects of isolation and loneliness. We all struggle under the pressure that’s created and exasperated through social media. So why do we persist? Why can’t we seem to opt out? Are we truly so addicted we cannot stop?

How many families have to break up? How many pills do we have to take? How many children have to suffer before we wake up from the nightmare we find ourselves in? When will we stop believing the lie that life is all about me? All about my wants? All about my desires? The world tells us to “follow your heart” and “be true to yourself.” I can think of nothing more devastating. The world tells us we “can be whoever we want to be” and to do “whatever feels good.” I can think of nothing more heartbreaking. Do we not see the pain we are leaving in our wake? The broken relationships? And for what? So we can selfishly pursue our own happiness at the expense of others? Do we not see the toll this is taking? The high price we are paying? The cost to those around us, especially those we love most? (If you need examples, do a google search on the New York Times and divorce. They have published several articles over the last couple of years extolling the virtues of divorce as an act of “self-actualization.” Ugh.)

I meet them every single day. In coffee shops and bars all over town. Men and women and children who are suffering. Struggling. Wrestling with a deep sense of existential loneliness because they have tried their best to do life on their own. They “believed in themselves” but that belief took them nowhere. Like Sinatra, they did life “my way” only to find themselves at a dead end. They tried to be the captain of their own destiny. The master of their own fate. The ruler of their own domain only to discover their reach far exceeded their grasp. In the words of Jesus, they built their entire lives on sand and their ruin was great.

Perhaps that describes you today. You are looking around at the ruins of your marriage. The ruins of your family. The ruins of your professional career. Your bank account is overdrawn. Your energy levels are dangerously low. Your emotional reserves are tapped out. Your relationships are broken. Your heart is aching. And you feel so very alone. Depressed. Angry. Frustrated. Anxious. Afraid. Perhaps you’ve even been tempted to put an end to it all. Don’t believe the lie! God is with you! Even in the valley of

the shadow! Even in the darkest of nights! His presence is always there to comfort and to guide and to bring us back into the light!

So how do we get from here to there? We start building on the rock. We start by surrendering our hearts and lives to Jesus. We invite the Holy Spirit to come and take up residence within us so He may transform us from the inside out. Only God can re-orient the desires of our hearts! Only God can re-prioritize the values of our lives! Only God can redirect our loves. As He does this deep work in us, what comes out of us begins to change. Life on the outside begins to reflect the new life that's emerging on the inside. Regenerate actions flow from a regenerated heart. New wine is poured from new wineskins as God removes our hearts of stone and gives us new hearts that beat for Him alone!

How do we know if we've received this new heart? Look at the Sermon on the Mount. Rather than treat it as a list of "do's and don'ts" instead consider it more of a diagnostic. Let the words of Jesus dissect your every thought. Your every deed. Your every emotion. Let it stand like a plumb line in your life against which you are constantly measuring yourself. Not because you must earn God's favor but because you long to bring glory to God. Not because you have to follow some law but because you want to chart the progress the Holy Spirit is making in sanctifying you for His Kingdom. Not because you have to clean yourself up before God can love you or accept you but because you trust He has already done so and is hard at work to present you blameless before His throne.

One can spend a lifetime learning from these few chapters and still never arrive. This isn't about perfection, friends. It's about the journey. It's about following the way of Jesus. And if you are like most, you will find yourself stumbling down the road like a drunk man, swaying from one side to the other. That's okay. That's actually quite normal. The key is to keep walking down the road.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 8:5-13, 11:1-30, Luke 7

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October 14, 2022

Dining with Jesus

Readings for today: Matthew 8:5-13, 11:1-30, Luke 7

Imagine you're having Jesus over for dinner. You send out invitations. Line up a caterer. Clean your house. Put out tables and chairs. Light your scented candles. Maybe even spring for some live music. You leave nothing to chance. You want Him to be impressed. The day of the affair arrives. Your home is packed with people. These are your friends. Your colleagues. Your family. All of whom cannot wait to meet Jesus. He walks in. What do you do? Do you greet Him? Offer to take His coat? Get Him a drink? Give Him the seat of honor? Do you make sure to serve Him first as your guest? Introduce Him to all your friends by name? Make sure He feels welcomed and honored? Of course you would. You would be embarrassed if you didn't. Your friends would be ashamed of you.

Let's take it up a notch. Imagine what would happen if a homeless man wandered in to your home that evening. Or a prostitute. Or a drug addict. Imagine them disrupting things. Imagine the crowd parting as people stumble over themselves so they don't have to touch them. Imagine the room going silent and all eyes turning to you to see how you will respond. Now imagine those same eyes shifting to Jesus as the homeless man/prostitute/drug addict falls at His feet. Weeping. Shedding so many tears, Jesus' feet literally become drenched. Now imagine the homeless man taking out a dirty handkerchief to wipe His shoes. The prostitute letting her hair down to dry his feet. The drug addict using his ratty t-shirt. You would probably be uncomfortable with the whole scene. Unsure of what to do or how to respond. Embarrassed by their behavior. After all, this whole affair is supposed to be about impressing Jesus!

Imagine Jesus turns to you and tells you a story. Two people went into deep debt to a loan shark. One for five hundred thousand and the other for fifty. Neither could afford to pay. In a shocking move, the loan shark forgave both their debts. Which would love him more? The one who owed him the greater amount, of course. This homeless man. This woman of the night. This poor addict struggle with many things. Their lives are a trainwreck. Your life, on the other hand, is good. You live in a nice home. You are surrounded by people who love and respect you. You make a good living. You enjoy some of the finer things of life. Yes, you know you are not perfect. Yes, you have your own struggles. Yes, life is not always easy. But you have been given much whereas this man. This woman. This addict have been given little. And even what little they did have has been squandered away. Who do you think will love Me more?

The one who is forgiven much, loves much. The one who is forgiven little, loves little. Friends, ask the Father to show you the full measure of your sin. Ask Him to show you how far you have fallen short of His glory. Not so that you will despair but so you can more deeply appreciate the sacrifice He made to save you. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it. He sent Jesus so the world might be saved through Him! All of us from the richest to the poorest. From the most privileged to the most oppressed. Perpetrators and victims alike need forgiveness. We all need grace. And Jesus stands ready to offer it to us in abundance. Know your sins have been forgiven and let that fan the flames of your devotion to Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 12:22-50, Mark 3:22-35, Luke 8:19-21, 11:14-54

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October 15, 2022

A House Divided

Readings for today: Matthew 12:22-50, Mark 3:22-35, Luke 8:19-21, 11:14-54

"Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand." (Matt. 12:25)

Abraham Lincoln quoted this verse in his famous campaign speech delivered in 1858 at the Illinois Republican State Convention. Though largely unknown, he had just won the nomination to run for U.S. Senate against Stephen A. Douglas. Lincoln was referring to the issue of slavery, of course. Douglas wanted to find a middle ground between the North and South but Lincoln knew better. He knew the issue had to be settled once and for all. He knew there could be no compromise. He knew the United States could not continue with half in support of slavery and half in support of freedom. A nation divided cannot stand.

The same was true in Jesus' day. The house of Israel was divided along all kinds of political lines. Some supported collaboration with Rome. Some refused to entertain any such thing. Some advocated for a violent overthrow. Others eschewed violence altogether. Some believed the answer was Torah faithfulness. Others withdrew into the desert because they believed the religious authorities were corrupt. And then along comes Jesus. A miracle worker. A healer. An exorcist. He performs His signs and wonders publicly and it must have felt to the scribes and Pharisees like He was throwing gasoline on the fire. It's why they tried so hard to discredit Him. Accusing Him of casting out demons by the power of the devil. But Jesus was ready for them. He knows their kingdom is divided and is about to be laid waste. He knows the glorious city of Jerusalem is a tinderbox waiting to explode. He has no desire to act as an "accelerant" rather He wants them to see and experience the Kingdom of God. He points them to the fruit of His actions. The blind see. The mute speak. The deaf hear. The lame walk. These are not acts of the devil that result in further pain and suffering and division and brokenness. No, the fruit Jesus bears is healing, wholeness, and restoration. All signs of the Holy Spirit at work.

I've been thinking about this verse a lot recently. We are raising teenagers in our home so it can often feel like we are living in a "house divided." Sometimes the conflict is almost too much to bear. It's in those moments when things seem hardest that God speaks to me. He reminds me His mercies are new every morning. His faithfulness is great. I can cast all my anxieties on Him because He cares for me. His perfect love casts out all my fear. He sets me free to bear the fruit of healing, wholeness, grace, and peace as I raise my children and they are blessed. A family divided cannot stand.

I am also the pastor of a church. It's not easy leading a church in these tumultuous times. The COVID pandemic exposed all sorts of divisions politically and socially among God's people. Many of our political leaders stoked the fires of fear and anger and hatred and division and sadly those fires are burning bright in many churches. It's heartbreaking to receive some of the emails I've received from people I've known and loved for many years. It's painful to watch families and communities split apart over issues that have nothing to do with the gospel. Many pastors are leaving the ministry. Many churches are closing their doors. A church divided cannot stand.

How does a follower of Christ respond in this cultural moment? We respond like Jesus. We make it our aim to act as agents of healing in our communities, doing all we can to come alongside those who are hurting. We act as agents of unity in our communities, doing all we can to bring people together. We act as agents of wholeness in our communities, binding up the broken and helping them put the pieces back together. We act as agents of blessing in our community, bearing the fruit of the Spirit which is good and righteous and true.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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October 17, 2022

The Kingdom of God

Readings for today: Matthew 13:1-53, Mark 4:1-34, Luke 8:1-18

Have you ever wondered what the Kingdom of God is actually like? And how it differs from the kingdoms of this world? In our readings for today, Jesus takes up the subject of the Kingdom of God and describes it from a number of different angles.

The Kingdom is like a field full of different kinds of soils, some more fruitful than others.

The Kingdom is like a paddock where both wheat and weeds grow up together.

The Kingdom is like the smallest of seeds that blossoms into one of the largest of trees.

The Kingdom is like the little bit of leaven one puts in bread to leaven the whole lump

The Kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field.

The Kingdom is like that one pearl of great price.

The Kingdom is like a net that captures all kinds of fish, some good and some bad.

It is striking how different Jesus' kingdom is from the kingdoms of this world. The world's kingdoms value wealth and power and success. They measure themselves according to their size and influence. Their goal is to achieve as much as possible. To sit atop the rankings. They jockey for position. The compete with one another. They take delight on another's fall even as they scramble for a higher rung on the proverbial ladder.

Sadly, too many churches fall into this trap as well. We value attendance. The size of our annual budgets. The number of people on staff. The beauty and attractiveness of our property and facilities. We jockey for position on Outreach Magazine's Top 100. We seek to expand our brand by planting churches in communities where many other gospel-preaching churches may already exist. We define success by the number of new attendees even though statistics show they are often transfers from the churches around us. So our "success" is really another church's "failure." The American church is particularly susceptible to this line of thinking. I heard a pastor recently argue that we should pull back from missions around the world so we could focus on planting churches in America. After all, he said, imagine what God could do with all the resources we have in this country? As if God needs our resources to accomplish His mission.

I will confess my own failings here as well. It is so tempting for me to focus on the crowd that gathers on a Sunday morning. To dwell on how they receive the message I preach and whether or not they are putting it into practice. I spend a lot of energy daydreaming over what God could do with the resources of my church family and how that would impact not only Parker but the whole world. If I am not careful, my passion to reach the lost with the gospel and see God awaken every heart in my congregation could spill over into a sinful trust in our strength. Our wealth. Our resources. It is good to be reminded that the Kingdom cannot be measured by the number of people who attend. The number of dollars given. The ability to expand programming and update facilities. The Kingdom is measured in much smaller, more subtle ways. It is the man set free from addiction. The abused woman who finds a

listening ear. It is a marriage saved by counseling. A child who invites Jesus into their heart. It is a person going on a mission trip for the very first time or volunteering to serve in a classroom even though they feel so inadequate to the task. It is men and women stepping forth to lead and serve in all sorts of ways. This is what the Kingdom is like. It is often hidden. Often under the radar. Often under the surface. It is messy and complex. Never clean or neat or easy. It is often two steps forward, one step back. The people we think have so much potential often are the most resistant and the people we often overlook become the true heroes and heroines of the faith.

In my experience, good soil is always mixed in with concrete, gravel, thorns and thistles. Wheat is always mixed in with weeds. Mustard seeds often get lost in the shuffle. Leaven disappears into the dough. The treasure sometimes stays hidden for years. Finding that one pearl can take decades. Casting a wide net brings in all kinds of fish. Such is life in the Kingdom and thank God it's not up to me to sort it all out.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 8:18-34, 9:18-38, Mark 4:35-41, 5:1-43, Luke 8:22-56, 9:57-62

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October 18, 2022

Riding Out the Storm

Readings for today: Matthew 8:18-34, 9:18-38, Mark 4:35-41, 5:1-43, Luke 8:22-56, 9:57-62

Every year around Christmas or my birthday, my wife and I talk about how notoriously difficult it is to buy a gift for me. I have a few hobbies like hiking or reading or working out but those don't come with a lot of needs. I'm not big into clothes. I don't have a lot of toys. I live a pretty simple life at the end of the day. However, last year something changed. I found an organization that employs artists to re-produce famous artwork in the same medium. I told my wife about it and she asked if I would ever want something from them. I asked for an oil on canvas reproduction of The Storm on the Sea of Galilee painted by Rembrandt in 1633. She agreed. She got our whole family to pitch in. It took fourteen weeks to arrive and it now hangs in my office next to the rocking chair where I spend time with God almost every morning.

I love looking at that painting as I meditate and pray. I often find myself identifying with one or more of the disciples in the boat. Sometimes I'm near the front trying with all my might to keep the sails up in the midst of the storm. Sometimes I'm in the back holding onto the rudder. Sometimes I'm the guy puking over the side. ;-) Through it all, Jesus just sits there calmly letting me know He is with me. I am in no danger because He is in control. The wind and the waves pose no threat to Him or to those who call on His name.

Take a look at the painting below. Let yourself marvel with the disciples at the One who controls every storm. Let yourself rest in His presence. Let His peace flow over you. No matter what you may be going through in your life right now, He is with you. You are in no danger. He can heal every disease. He can cast out every demon. He can even raise the dead! Nothing in this world can snatch you out of His hand!

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 10, 14, Mark 6:7-56, Luke 9:1-17, John 6

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The Storm on the Sea of Galilee painted by Rembrandt in 1633.

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October 19, 2022

Sent Ones

Readings for today: Matthew 10, 14, Mark 6:7-56, Luke 9:1-17, John 6

I leave Sunday for Africa. I will fly out of Denver around 9PM and arrive in Dessie, Ethiopia on Tuesday at 4:15PM. Tee to green, it's a journey of about 36 hours. Dessie is located in the Amhara region of Ethiopia in the northern part of the country where a conflict has been raging off and on for a couple of years. Dessie itself was occupied for a period of time before the government recaptured it last year. We are heading there to train church planters. Last spring, we launched fifty new church planters into the area and we are planning on launching seventy-five more next week. We will spend our time praying for them. Worshipping with them. Training them. Interviewing them. Partnering with their local, indigenous denominations to make sure they have the resources they need. It's a hard work. They will be ministering in an area where there is not only political conflict but religious conflict as well. They will face persecution. They will face opposition. They will face hostility. But they are not alone. Jesus is with them. The Holy Spirit empowers them. They've been given authority to heal the sick, cleanse lepers, cast out demons, and raise the dead. It's why I love being around them so much. They remind me of the first apostles.

Apostle is a word that simply means "sent one." It's less a title and more a description of a role. Apostles are emissaries. Their purpose is to convey a message. It was commonly translated "messenger" in ancient times. One can easily see why Jesus picked up this term. He was sending His disciples out on a mission. Their job was to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God in word and deed. They were to speak God's Word and then demonstrate the authority of God's Word through the performance of miraculous signs and wonders. It was a powerful combination. One that put them at odds with the local political and religious authorities. As a result, they would face hostility and opposition and persecution and yet many would believe their message and receive saving faith.

Every single Christian is called to be an apostle. Every single Christian is sent out by Jesus to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God. Every single Christian is called to risk everything for this endeavor. Our lives. Our livelihoods. All our worldly wealth and possessions. We are to hold nothing back in our attempt to reach the world with the gospel. This is what set those first disciples apart. It's what set the early church apart. It's what still sets apart Christians in places like Ethiopia, Djibouti, or South Sudan. They are changing entire villages and regions as they faithfully and sacrificially give their lives to answer the call. Are we not called to do the same? In whatever village, town, city, or region where we've been planted?

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 15, Mark 7, 8:1-10

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October 20, 2022

Honor/Shame Culture

Readings for today: Matthew 15, Mark 7, 8:1-10

"And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly." (Matthew 15:21-28)

This is perhaps the most confusing story in the gospels. Read through 21st century western eyes, it appears like Jesus is reflecting the sinful, racist attitudes of his day. Jews and Gentiles simply did not interact in the 1st century. Especially a rabbi and a woman. Jesus was fully within his cultural rights to ignore this woman. Reject this woman. Diminish this woman. Some modern commentators point to this story as an example of Jesus' humanity. They talk about how even Jesus needed correction from time to time. They claim even Jesus needed to progress in his understanding of divine love and the gospel. Nothing could be farther from the truth. True, authentic, honest Biblical exegesis must always begin by approaching the text from within it's own cultural milieu. We must do our best to remove our own cultural blinders and instead do the hard work of reading the passage against its own cultural backdrop. When one does this, the true meaning of the story comes into view…

The first thing to note is the place. Jesus has intentionally traveled to the region of Tyre and Sidon. This area was a major economic hub and trade center in that part of the world. As such, it was deeply Hellenized. Jews were the marginalized group. They were the ones being exploited for material gain. So why would Jesus go there? Earlier in his ministry Jesus likens His ministry to that of Elijah who once miraculously fed a widow in Sidon when she was starving. The point, of course, is that Jesus' ministry will transcend race and culture though He will preach first to His own people.

The second thing to note is the time. Like much of the Middle East today, 1st century Palestine was an "honor/shame" culture. As such, there were strict rules governing the behavior of men and women. When those rules were followed, honor accrued. When those rules were ignored, shame accrued. Men gained honor through acts of courage and generosity in the community while women gained honor through their modesty and privacy in the home and family. It would be crazy for an honorable woman to approach a strange man in public across not only gender but ethnic lines just as it would be crazy for an honorable man - a rabbi no less! - to respond to such a woman. However, in this instance, all bets are off due to the desperation this woman feels as she seeks to save her child.

The third thing to note is how the woman addresses Jesus. She addresses Him by his messianic title. She clearly sees Him as more than an itinerant Jewish preacher. She clearly recognizes He's no ordinary rabbi. There's something different about this man that makes her abandon all honor in order to fall at his feet with the beggars standard cry, "Have mercy on me." She would have not have interpreted His silence as an insult. In fact, she would have expected it and sought to overcome it.

Finally, there is the actual exchange itself. When Jesus answers with, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”, He is inviting an interaction with the woman. In essence, He’s saying, “tell me why I should help you?” The woman responds by drawing closer. Her cries of desperation turn to the simple plea of “Lord, help me.” And now the so-called “game” is on. In honor/shame cultures there are rules for this kind of dialogue. A challenge is offered. A response is given. Honor is accrued based on who gets the “best” of the interaction. Jesus has challenged this woman. She has responded. So Jesus offers another challenge. “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” Dogs in Jewish culture were almost as bad as pigs. They were mangy, half-wild animals who roamed the streets. Jews regularly used this term as an insult to Gentiles but here Jesus softens it a bit. The term He uses is in the diminutive form - i.e. “little dogs” or puppies - which again suggests He’s fully aware of the game that is taking place. The woman doesn’t even miss a beat. “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” One can almost see the twinkle in Jesus’ eyes and his smile of appreciation for how she’s “bested” Him and He freely gives her the honor she has “won.”

Now here’s the really crazy thing about Jesus. It’s what I love most about Him. In “honor/shame” contests, a person typically gains honor at another’s expense. It’s why such contests were so important in 1st century society. It’s how one climbed the socio-economic ladder and became known in their community. Jesus is different. He isn’t interested in how much “honor” accumulates. Instead, He freely gives honor away at His own expense. What about us? We who have been saved by Christ have been given all the “honor” a person could ever receive! We’ve literally been invited into God’s family and adopted as His sons and daughters. What more could we want? Having been given much, should we not seek to give it away? Should we not seek to share the honor we’ve received from God with those around us? Should we not opt out of the power games our culture still plays and instead take the place of the servant?

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 16, Mark 8:11-38, 9:1, Luke 9:18-27

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October 21, 2022

The Cross-Shaped Life

Readings for today: Matthew 16, Mark 8:11-38, 9:1, Luke 9:18-27

Following Jesus requires sacrifice. It requires self-denial. It requires picking up a cross. Jesus pulls no punches in our reading today. When Peter takes up the tempter's role and tries to convince Jesus to forgo the way of suffering laid out for Him, Jesus rightly perceives the presence of Satan behind Peter's words. He rebukes Peter harshly just as He once rebuked Satan in the desert, just as He will rebuke him again in the Garden of Gethsemane. Satan is ever-present in Jesus' life. Always seeking to turn Him aside from His Father's plan. Satan knows who he's dealing with. He's under no illusion as to Jesus' identity. He may not understand the full implications of the cross. He may not be able to see the resurrection. But he knows Jesus is the Son of God. He knows Jesus holds the power and authority of God. He knows Jesus is on a mission from God. And he does all he can to derail Him along the way.

Satan is ever-present in our lives as well. Always seeking to turn us aside from the Father's plan for our lives. It's why he tempts us constantly to choose a path without suffering. A path without pain. A path without sacrifice. Satan knows what happens when Christians take up a cross. His power is made perfect in their weakness. His Kingdom comes through their surrender. His will is done as they willingly relinquish all they are and all they have to Him. This is what Satan fears most. True believers who pursue a lifestyle of self-denial in the name of Jesus. True believers who willingly lay down their lives for the sake of the gospel. True believers who find their greatest joy in giving it all for the sake of the Kingdom.

We cannot avoid the cross-shaped life. Not if we want to follow Jesus. On the contrary, Christians understand our lives are not our own. Our possessions are not our own. Our money is not our own. Our time is not our own. Our talent and ability is not our own. Our gifts are not our own. All our achievement and success is not our own. All of these things have been given to us by God so that we might share them with those around us. All of these things have been entrusted to us by God so that we might steward them for His Kingdom purposes. And all of us will one day have to stand before the Lord and give an account of what we did with all He has given us.

Take some time today and reflect on all God has given you. Open up your schedule and prayerfully ask God how He wants you to spend your time. Are you spending daily time with Him. Are you engaging in weekly, in person worship with other believers? Are you regularly finding ways to serve your church family and community? Review your bank statement and latest update to your investment portfolio and ask God how He wants you to spend your money. Are you giving Him the firstfruits of your hard work? Are you giving at least ten percent of your income to the Lord? Are you seeking to be more generous and more sacrificial with each passing year? Sit back and ponder the gifts and talents and abilities God has given you. How are you using these gifts for God's Kingdom purposes? How are you offering these gifts in service to God? As you spend time in prayer, make sure to take every thought captive Christ through His Word. Satan will do all he can to derail this process. He will do all he can to disrupt and distract you along the way. He wants you as far away from the cross as possible. Rebuke him and instead cling to Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 17-18, Mark 9:2-50, Luke 9:28-56

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October 22, 2022

True Greatness

Readings for today: Matthew 17-18, Mark 9:2-50, Luke 9:28-56

We all want to be great. We all want to be known. We all want to be significant. In large or small ways, we all desire success. Achievement. Recognition. We want to be the best. Finish first. Get to the top of whatever mountain we're trying to climb. We want respect. We want the people around us to think highly of us. We want to be able to look in the mirror and be proud of what we see.

The same was true for the disciples. They signed on - or so they thought - to this new kingdom movement. They believed Jesus was the Messiah. They believed He was the Christ. And for them - Jews living in the 2nd Temple period of Israel's history - this could only mean one thing…Jesus would lead a revolution. He would cleanse the Temple. Toss out the religious elites. Overthrow the Romans. Re-establish the throne of David. Win Israel's independence from foreign powers. This is what had happened throughout their history and they wanted in on the ground floor when it happened again.

So they asked Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" It's a loaded question. Freighted with all kinds of cultural and relational baggage. On a personal level, they are asking for themselves. Which of us is the greatest? Which of us will get to sit at your right hand? On a cultural level, they are asking for discernment to find out who's in and who's out. Who among the crowds that are following them are worthy to be part of this new kingdom? And who do we need to keep out? On a political level, they want to know who will hold the power and positions of influence in this new kingdom? What cabinet positions will we occupy once you've established your rule and reign? They want to know so they can prepare. They want to know so they can start jockeying for position. They're probably looking around at each other, measuring the competition.

Jesus' response had to be mystifying. The humblest are the greatest? The last are the first? The least have the most? We have to become like children to enter the kingdom? Remember, in that culture, children were non-persons. More like property. They had no rights. No freedoms. At the same time, children were deeply loved. Showered with affection. They were considered God's greatest blessing for a family. So what is it about children that makes them so great in Jesus' eyes?

First and foremost, trust. Children, especially when very young, find it easy to trust. They accept what their parents say without question. If you tell them the sun will rise at midnight, they will wake up fully expecting it to happen. They believe easily. They are not skeptical. At least not until they get older. They've not had all the life experiences that can make us cynical and bitter. They see the world through rose-colored glasses. They believe the best about those around them. And this is what Jesus wants from His disciples as well.

Second, humility. Little children do not harbor ambition. They do not need to be rich and famous. They do not grasp for power or influence or authority. They are not wrapped up in achievement or success. They are not self-conscious or even self-aware. Self has no place in their thinking at all! I believe it was CS Lewis who once said "true humility is not thinking more highly of yourself than you ought. Nor is it thinking less of yourself than you ought. It is simply thinking of your "self" less." This comes naturally to a child and Jesus wants it to come naturally to His disciples.

Third, wonder. Children live with a sense of wonder and awe at the world around them. They love to explore. They love to adventure. They are naturally curious. Naturally inquisitive. They want to know

why things work they way they do or why things are the way they are. I remember when my four children went through their “why” phase. Every question. Every day. For weeks on end. Why this? Why that? Why? Why? Why? Sure, it got annoying but when I stepped back, I could see the wonder underlying it all. They simply wanted to know more about this grand world in which we live.

There are probably many more lessons we can draw from our passage this morning but I have to believe Jesus - coming off His transfiguration moment - wanted to cement in His disciple’s hearts the truth of His Kingdom. It would not be like the kingdoms of this world. It would not be run like the kingdoms of this world. It would not hold to the same values of the kingdoms of this world. It would be radically different. Wholly other. And their entrance into such a kingdom would come only as they left their old lives behind and embraced the new life Jesus offers in Himself.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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October 24, 2022

No Condemnation

Readings for today: John 7-9

We've all probably heard the phrase, "Love the sinner, hate the sin." I don't know about you but I have not found it all that helpful. First of all, those who do not believe are not convinced they are "sinners" and tend to resent the moniker. Second, it's really hard to do. Separating one's behavior from one's identity is growing more and more difficult in our world. In fact, there are many who would argue it is impossible. And yet Jesus seemed to do it all the time.

The beginning of John 8 is a famous story. Maybe one of the most famous in all of Scripture. And though it's origin is questionable - it doesn't appear in the earliest and best manuscripts - it just sounds like Jesus so we tend to keep it in. A woman caught in the very act of adultery is brought before Jesus. The Pharisees and teachers of the law are almost gleeful in their condemnation. They can't wait to pick up the first stone. They throw her down before Him, pretty convinced He will have mercy which in turn will allow them to accuse Him of breaking the Law. Of course, anyone familiar with the Law can already see the problem. If they caught this woman in the act, where is the man? According to Leviticus 20:10 both parties deserve the death penalty. Perhaps that's what Jesus is writing in the dust? Maybe He knows the man's name? If they caught her in the act, why have they not carried out her punishment? The Law is clear. What's stopping them? Perhaps it's because they don't really care about her crime but are far more concerned with trapping Jesus?

In response, Jesus does this extraordinary thing. He puts the onus back on them. "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." He hasn't condemned her nor has He affirmed her. He hasn't condemned the Pharisees nor has He affirmed them. Instead, Jesus brilliantly lobs the ball back in their court and forces them to make their own decision. The Pharisees put down their stones and slowly walk away. The woman is left all alone, prompting this famous exchange. "Woman, has no one condemned you?" "No one, Lord." "Nor do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

I simply love this about Jesus. He accepts people for who they are but loves them too much to leave them there. He meets us right where we are, takes us by the hand, and leads us to a better place. He accepts us, warts and all, without affirming our sin. To the Pharisee, he says, "Are you really without sin?" To those caught in sin, he says, "I do not condemn you." And to both, he says, "Go and sin no more."

As Christians, there is a lot in this world we simply cannot affirm. Changing attitudes in gender and sexuality. Abortion on demand. Racism and sexual abuse. Deceit and falsehood. Anger and hate. These things are not of God and yet so many embrace them. Defend them. Use them as means to a greater end. The answer cannot be rejection. Jesus simply will not allow us to walk away from anyone, including our enemies. So we must find a way - as Jesus found a way - to accept people for who they are without affirming their beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors. Thankfully, this is the heart of the gospel. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. While we were enemies of God, Christ made peace with us. While we were pushing Him away, Christ embraced us. May the Spirit give us the courage to do the same!

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 10, John 10:1-11:54

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October 25, 2022

Cutting Through the Noise

Readings for today: Luke 10, John 10:1-1:54

Noise. There's a lot of it in our lives. From the moment our alarm clocks go off until we finally put down the phone or turn off the television at the end of the night, our lives are full of noise. So many voices. Telling us all kinds of things. Much of it not good for us. The bully at school who tells us we're worthless. The co-worker who's so negative all the time. The spouse who badgers or berates us. The child who screams when they don't get their way. The commercials that tempt us to think life is all about us. The subliminal messages coming through on social media that constantly invite comparison. The news outlets spinning world events to bolster a particular worldview. The proliferation of fake news, gossip, and a rumor mill run wild. And, in the middle of it all, the still small voice of God whispering continually to our hearts.

Can you hear Him? Can you hear His voice? Amidst all the noise and distractions? When was the last time you sat in silence? I mean true silence. No one around. No devices present to distract. No radio. No television. Just you and God sitting in silence together. "My sheep hear my voice…" Perhaps one of the main reasons we struggle so much with our faith is we do not take the time to listen for God's voice. We expect Him to compete with all the other voices in our lives. Shout them down. Yell over the top of them. We expect Him to make Himself known to us but we refuse to create space in our lives for that to happen. Instead, we expect Him to push His way in. Elbow His way to the front of the line. Then and only then will we turn and acknowledge Him.

Jesus doesn't work that way. There's a great story from the Old Testament about a man named Elijah. He went out to meet with God. A great storm whipped up. God wasn't in the storm. A great fire raged. God wasn't in the fire. A great earthquake shook the very ground. God wasn't in the earthquake. Then a still small voice. Elijah covered his head. He knew he was hearing the voice of God. "My sheep hear my voice…" Do you want to hear the voice of God? Make time for solitude and silence in your life.

For me, this often comes at the end of the day. My children are in bed. My wife as well. I sit in my favorite chair in the living room. Nothing is on. I read God's Word. I meditate. I pray. I think back over the events of my day. The people I met. The conversations I had. The work I was able to accomplish. I pay close attention to how I experienced each moment. And I lay those feelings before the Lord. I ponder what's to come the following day. What am I excited about? Nervous about? Who will I be meeting with and how can I serve them? What challenges will I be facing and how do they make me feel? All of these things I simply lay before Lord and ask Him to speak into them. Sometimes He does. Sometimes He simply reaches out and takes my hand, letting me know He'll be with me no matter what.

My sheep hear my voice. I know them. They follow me. There's nothing more comforting than walking through life with the Good Shepherd at your side.

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 12:1-13:30

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October 26, 2022

Honor God

Readings for today: Luke 12:1-13:30

One of the real benefits of coming to Africa is I learn to think in different ways. Ethiopia is an honor-shame culture like much of the rest of the world. What this means is they tend to think collectively instead of individually. Morality is determined relationally rather than internally. The focus is not so much on how to get something right as it is to honor the person and/or community in the process.

The Bible is written in an honor-shame cultural context. It cannot be fully understood apart from this. The stories Jesus tells are less "morality tales" and more about how to honor God and one another through the gospel. The story of the rich fool is a prime example of what I'm talking about. The traditional interpretation is that the man placed his trust in his riches. His sin was to build bigger barns. He was greedy and therefore fell under God's judgment. But a close reading from the honor-shame perspective reveals even deeper truths.

What was the man's primary sin? What was it that would have been obvious to everyone listening to Jesus that day? It was when he said, "I know what I will do…" His refusal to honor the community was his major mistake. Whenever a person had a bumper crop in the 1st century, he would make his way down to the village gate to seek advice from the elders. He would tell of the abundant blessings God had poured out on him and he would ask them what he should do. They would deliberate and discuss but eventually would suggest things like making an extravagant offering to the Lord, throwing a party so the whole village could celebrate, and giving to the poor. The man would then go out and do all these things in an effort to bring honor to his community. If, after giving to God and giving to the poor and throwing a party, he still had too much for his current barns to hold then perhaps it would be time to throw up new barns. Perhaps the whole community would come out to help. And everyone would experience the blessing.

As American Christians, we tend to think far too individualistically and we tend to read the Bible far too individualistically. We turn everything into a personal morality tale and while that isn't all bad, it certainly doesn't get to the heart of the gospel. When Adam and Eve first sinned in the Garden of Eden, they realized they were naked and immediately felt ashamed. The heart of the story from Genesis 3 onward is of a God who is on a mission to remove our shame. Remove our guilt. Remove our sin. He seeks to cover our shame with His own honor and that's why Jesus tells the stories He does. This is the central message at the heart of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. It's the primary driver behind this parable of the rich fool and so many others like it. Jesus takes all His divine honor and glory and gives it away to tax collectors and prostitutes and other sinners.

How then do we respond? We respond the way a tax collector named Zaccheus did. He gave away half of his possessions and made restitution to those he had defrauded. We respond the way a prostitute did, breaking a jar of costly ointment – her most prized possession – over Jesus' head in an extravagant act of devotion. We respond the way the first disciples did, leaving everything behind in order to follow Jesus. This is how who have been honored by God seek to honor Him in return.

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 14-15

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October 27, 2022

The Mission of Jesus

Readings for today: Luke 14-15

Jesus came to save the least and the lost. He loves them so much He gave His life for them. He will do anything and everything to draw them to Himself. It's why he heals on the Sabbath. It's why He talks of feasts where the poor, the blind, the crippled and the lame become guests of honor. He's the king who is rejected by his friends and sends his servants out to the highways and byways to bring in those who are the least worthy of his attention. It's why He tells stories about a lost sheep that is found. A lost coin that is rediscovered. And two lost sons who are restored. These are the ways of the Kingdom of God and followers of Jesus will seek to walk in these ways themselves.

Do you love the least and the lost? Or do you instead seek a place of honor and glory for yourself? Are you like the man who went to the banquet and took the seat of highest honor for himself? Are you like the invited guests who made all kinds of excuses as to why they couldn't come or had to delay their attendance at the great wedding feast? Are there things in your life that you love more than Jesus? Listen to His words again…

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate…even his own life cannot be my disciple."

"Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."

"So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

These are hard sayings to be sure. They do not make any sense from a human perspective. We cannot imagine why the call to follow Jesus would be so costly. And yet, Jesus clearly leaves us no wiggle room. Why? Is it because Jesus is cruel? Is it because Jesus is capricious? Uncaring? Is it because Jesus is a tyrant? The answer is a clear "NO" to all of these things. It is because Jesus is 110% committed to His mission to reach the least and the lost of our world. Those who live at the bottom of society. Those who struggle and suffer and for whom life is full of pain and heartbreak. God loves them with an everlasting love and His great desire is to lift them up. Bless them. Heal them and make them whole.

Jesus has one plan to accomplish this great end. His church. His people. Those who are called by His name and set apart for His purposes. Why must we relinquish all in order to follow Jesus? It is so He can use us as He sees fit. Send us where He needs us. Take our resources and deploy them for His purposes in the world. Our response must be open hands and open hearts. A humble willingness to let God use us as He sees fit. Only then will we find true fulfillment and true joy. Only then will we experience the peace that passes all understanding. Only then will we know the unconditional love and grace of God in our lives.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 19, Mark 10:1-31, Luke 16:1-18:30

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October 28, 2022

All the Wrong Questions

Readings for today: Matthew 19, Mark 10:1-31, Luke 16:1-18:30

I've often marveled at the patience of Jesus. Our questions must seem so silly to Him at times. Our concerns so insignificant in the grand scheme of things. He must shake His head at the way we respond to conflict, interruptions, or those in need. He must grieve at the multitude of ways we try to find loopholes in His Law. His heart must ache when all we seem to want is the absolute minimum when it comes to salvation. Especially when He has so much more in store for us! We are so like the Pharisees and the first disciples. We are no different than those who followed Jesus in those early days. We are selfish and self-absorbed. We are far more caught up in "getting" something from God rather than "giving" our lives to Him. At a fundamental level, we believe we are good people. We believe we deserve God's attention. We believe we have done enough to earn God's favor and love. How much better if we were simply like the tax collector. Slumped in the shadows. Faces in our hands. Never daring to gaze heavenward. Praying a very simple, very ancient prayer, God be merciful to me, a sinner. (Luke 18:13)

In our readings for today, we see all sorts of different people approaching Jesus asking all the wrong questions. The Pharisees want to know under conditions a man can divorce his wife. The better question would be how can a man reconcile with his wife when their relationship seems irretrievably broken? The disciples try to shoo away children who are coming to Jesus for a blessing. A better response would be to pause in their journey and lovingly welcome each and every one of them into His presence. A rich young man asks what he must do to gain eternal life. He seeks to accumulate eternal riches like he has his earthly ones. Jesus sees right through him and challenges him to exchange his "transactional" life for a life of utter dependence on God. Over and over again, their questions betray how little they understand God's Kingdom and the same is true for us as well.

Jesus challenges us to shift our perspective. To lift our eyes above the horizons of this world, above the horizons of this life, above what we think is reasonable or rational to the impossible possibilities God offers to those who authentically and honestly seek His Kingdom. His Kingdom is not of this world. His Kingdom doesn't run on earthly power. His Kingdom has no need of earthly resources. The values of His Kingdom often seem incomprehensible to us and yet when we begin to align our lives along them, we find incredible freedom, irrepressible joy, and a peace that passes all understanding. Can you imagine how your life would be different if you asked Jesus for the strength to reconcile rather than a way out of a conflicted relationship? Imagine if you welcomed interruptions from little children or those of little earthly significance in your life? Imagine trusting God so fully and completely that earthly possessions had no hold on you? How do we get from here to there? We simply pray the prayer of the lowly tax collector. God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Pray those words over and over again until you believe them about yourself. Only then will you find yourself living in the boundless horizons of God's Kingdom.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 20, Mark 10:32-52, Luke 18:31-19:27

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October 29, 2022

The Tragedy of Transactional Thinking

Readings for today: Matthew 20, Mark 10:32-52, Luke 18:31-19:27

Today's devotional builds off of what I wrote yesterday as Jesus continues to expose the hardness of our hearts. He tells a story about day laborers who are hired to work in a vineyard. They are hired in waves. Some at first light. Others mid-morning. Some come at lunchtime. Others mid-afternoon. Finally, there are those who arrive an hour before closing time. Each and every one receives the same wage. If you are like me, you probably feel the Master is being a bit unfair. Maybe even exploitative, especially for those who've been working all day. This isn't equal pay for equal work and those who put in more hours deserve higher pay. It just goes to show how little we understand the ethics of God's Kingdom.

Our problem is that we tend to think "transactionally." This is a natural consequence of growing up in a capitalist system. We work hard so we can earn a paycheck. We use our paycheck to pay the bills that fund our lifestyle. If I want more, I work harder. If I want to enjoy the finer things of life, I get more education, work my way up the corporate ladder, always be on the lookout for the better deal. Sadly, we approach relationships the same way. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. You do for me and I will do for you. I'll hold up my end of the deal as long as you hold up your end. As soon as one party reneges on the agreement or doesn't fulfill their obligations, we are free to terminate the arrangement and move on. This happens in marriage. Family. Friendships. Business partnerships. Church. Even our relationship with God.

Jesus wants us to grasp the wideness of God's mercy. The abundance of God's generosity. The radical nature of God's unconditional love. Our relationship with God is not based on works but purely on His grace. Whether we come to faith as a young child or on our deathbed, God gives us the same gift of eternal life. Whether we live a life of full devotion to God or we struggle to remain faithful along the way, God mercifully and graciously prepares a place for us. This is why Jesus is so appealing to tax collectors and sinners, prostitutes and beggars, the lame and the lepers. They all know they have nothing to offer God and have no expectation of being invited to be part of God's Kingdom. It's much different for those of us who are successful and wealthy, healthy and strong, popular and famous. We believe we've done well and have rightfully earned our spot in God's Kingdom.

Again, I want to challenge you pray this simple prayer. Pray it as often as possible until it you believe it. God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Every single human being – no matter their position or the number of their possessions – is a sinner. Utterly guilty of breaking God's perfect Law. We rightfully deserve God's judgment and our only hope is a divine pardon. Thankfully, God promises to show mercy to all who humble themselves before Him. I encourage you to cry out like the blind beggars of Jericho today and receive the mercy of Jesus as He heals your heart and makes you whole.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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October 31, 2022

Rightful Ownership

Readings for today: Matthew 21:1-22, 26:6-13, Mark 11:1-26, 14:3-9, Luke 19:28-48, John 2:13-25, 11:55-57, 12:1-36

I raised my kids to be independent thinkers. Strong-willed young men and women who can make their way in the world. I love how each of them is finding their way in the world and it is a privilege to walk the journey with them. One of the many lessons I've tried to teach them is the difference between stewardship and ownership. When we grow up, we don't own much. Everything from food to clothing to a roof over our heads is provided. Our job is to be good stewards. Clean our rooms. Follow the house rules. Take care of what we've been given. When we get older. Graduate from high school. Become legally responsible. We start to become owners. We get a job. We pay the bills. We buy things like our own cars or cell phones. As a parent, I no longer have much authority over how my child takes care of their home or how much money they spend on gas or the number of apps they download on their phone.

All four Gospels tell the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple. John's Gospel, however, contains a very important nugget of information. When Jesus drives out the money-changers and turns over the tables of the loan sharks, the Jews ask Him an important question. What sign do you show us that justifies your actions? In other words, by whose authority do you do these things? Who gave you the right to disrupt the Passover? Who told you to bring in the blind and the lame and begin healing? Will you not put a stop to the praises of the children? Jesus' reply could not be more clear, My house shall be called a house of prayer but you make it a den of robbers. Jesus is claiming His rightful ownership of the Temple. He is making it clear to the religious leaders that their stewardship of the sacred places has come to an end. The rightful owner is now on the scene and He will do with His House as He wills. And what is His will? His House will be a place of prayer. A Hospital for healing. A sanctuary for praise.

Imagine how you would feel if someone lived in your home and trashed the place. I have a good friend who owns a rental house in the Denver area. Several years ago, a tenant used his house to grow weed and cook meth. After going to court to get his tenant evicted, my friend had to gut the house and start over. It cost him thousands of dollars not to mention the time and effort he had to put in to get his house back in working order so it could be rented again. Now put yourself in Jesus' sandals. The people you've entrusted your Home to have trashed the place. They have turned it into a den of robbers. Exploiting the pilgrims who come for Passover each year. They make hefty profits by price gouging the people, especially the poor. So He makes a whip of cords and drives them out. He turns over the tables and throws them out. Do you understand now why Jesus is so upset? Zeal for His own Home has consumed Him and He will do whatever it takes to restore His House to it's former glory.

Now let me give you an even more radical take. Jesus doesn't just assert His authority over His House, He asserts it over all of creation with the fig tree. Not only that but He tells His disciples that if they have faith and embrace the Kingdom life, they will be able to operate with His authority in the world. They will be able to do to the fig tree what Jesus did or throw mountains into the heart of the sea. Most importantly, whatever they ask for in prayer will be given to them. Why? They are no longer tenants in God's Kingdom but sons and daughters! In a sense, we've been given an "ownership" stake in all of creation and God expects us to exercise dominion and authority and responsibility in His name and for His glory.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 21:23-22:14, Mark 11:27-12:12, Luke 20:1-18, John 12:37-50

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November 01, 2022

The Patience of God

Readings for today: Matthew 21:23-22:14, Mark 11:27-12:12, Luke 20:1-18, John 12:37-50

I've been thinking a lot about the patience of God. The endurance of God. The perseverance of God. One of God's great desires is that all should be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. He's been working towards this great end since the Fall of humankind into sin. He will never let us go. Never abandon us to our fate. Never stop reaching out to us. Never stop relentlessly pursuing us. Jesus says as much in one of my favorite parables. He talks about a man who planted a vineyard and leased to a particular group of people and then went into a far country, entrusting what he had made into their care. Unfortunately, the tenants got it into their heads that they deserved to keep the fruit of their labor so they rebelled against the master. They beat his servants. They treated them shamefully. They even killed a few along the way. Still the master was patient with them. He kept reaching out to them. Kept calling them back to covenant faithfulness. Eventually, the master sent his son, hoping to convince the tenants to listen to reason and repent of their ways. Tragically, those wicked tenants took the opportunity to kill the heir and secure the vineyard for themselves.

Isn't this how humanity operates? Our inhumanity to one another knows no bounds. I am ministering in a recent conflict zone over in Ethiopia this week. The people here have suffered tremendously. Their homes have been looted. Their city stripped bare. War crimes have been committed. Attempts at ethnic cleansing have taken place. It's horrifying on so many levels. The same thing is happening all over the world. It happens in nations like Ukraine. It happens in major cities where violent gangs run the streets. It happens in homes where abusers take out their anger on the innocent and vulnerable. So much violence. So much pain. So much heartbreak. Why doesn't God step in? Why doesn't God pour out His righteous wrath and judgment on those who perpetrate such evil? Why doesn't God lay waste to the wicked tenants of the earth?

According to Jesus, it's because God is still holding out hope for some of us to turn to Him. It's why He continues to send servants into the deepest, darkest places on earth to spread the good news of the gospel. I think of the men and women we are training this week. They already face persecution on levels I will never come to understand. They live under constant threat. They face beatings and torture and imprisonment. Some will possibly even die. The wicked tenants of this region are very resistant to God. Not that it's any different back home where I happen to live. The resistance is just not as obvious. The reality is we are all "wicked tenants" to some degree. Taking what God has entrusted to us and seeking to usurp God's rightful claim. I know I've caused my share of suffering over the years with the things I've said and done to those I love. I wish I could take it back. I carry a lot of regrets. I know God is going to hold me accountable when I stand before His judgment throne. Thankfully, however, I did not reject His Son. When Jesus confronted me on the University of Colorado in Boulder in February of 1993, I responded with repentance. I got on my knees and gave my life to Him. The stone I had once rejected became the cornerstone of my life. It was the Lord's doing and it remains marvelous to my eyes to this day. What about you? Where do you find yourself in this story today? Are you like the "wicked tenants" claiming ownership over your life or have you responded in faith to God's Son?

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 22:15-23:39, Mark 12:13-44, Luke 20:19-21:4, 13:31-35

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November 2, 2022

Questioning Jesus

Readings for today: Matthew 22:15-23:39, Mark 12:13-44, Luke 20:19-21:4, 13:31-35

Let me start by saying God welcomes honest, heart-felt questions. God loves nothing more than comforting His people when they come before Him confused and hurting. Struggling to understand. Trying to make sense of life and tragedy and suffering. He understands our doubts and fears. He can handle our anger and frustration. When we are honestly seeking Him. Honestly asking Him. Honestly and transparently and vulnerably bringing all our insecurities before Him, He gently gathers us in His arms and lets us know it will be okay. He is with us. He is here for us. He will never leave us or forsake us.

However…if we set out to test God. To put Him on the witness stand and demand He answer to our notions of what is right and good. If we put Him on trial and require Him to answer to our human notions of justice. If we doubt His integrity and character and nature. If we push Him and press Him and seek to discredit Him. We are playing a very dangerous game. One that places our eternal souls in jeopardy.

The religious rulers of the day had no interest in following Jesus. Their only aim was to discredit Him before the eyes of the people. They were seeking to trip Him up with their questions. They wanted to make a public spectacle of Him. Humiliate Him in the eyes of the people. Stamp out His ministry and movement and send Him back to Nazareth in disgrace. Their questions are designed to get Him in trouble politically – "is it lawful to pay taxes or not?" Their questions serve as impossible riddles – "a woman married seven times goes to heaven…whose wife will she be?" Their questions present logical impossibilities – "which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" But Jesus is not limited to human understanding. His answers reveal a divine wisdom that silences those who would seek to destroy Him. Then Jesus goes on the offensive, exposing their hypocrisy. They are the ones in violation of the Law! They are the ones who lack understanding! They are the ones who play political games! Woe to you scribes and Pharisees! Judgment is coming!

It's sobering to say the least. And it forces us to self-reflection. What lies at the heart of my own questions? An honest desire to understand? Or a selfish desire to justify my own actions? A tender insecurity for which I need God's comfort? Or an arrogant desire to go my own way and do my own thing? A doubt or a fear that keeps me from experiencing the peace that passes all understanding? Or a sinful desire to cling to an idol in my life? What is it that drives my questions? What lies at the heart of my doubts and fears and confusion? Am I putting God on trial or am I truly seeking His will?

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, Luke 21:5-38

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November 3, 2022

Reality Check

Readings for today: Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, Luke 21:5-38

Today Jesus gives us a reality check. In this world, we will suffer. There will be trials. There will be tribulation. The culture will reject God. Nations will defy God. Kings and rulers and authorities. Presidents and Congressional Representatives and Supreme Court Justices will go their own way and do what is right in their own eyes. There will be wars. Violence. Natural disasters on a devastating scale. Drought. Famine. Disease will afflict so many. People will embrace injustice. People will love ungodliness. People will chase unrighteousness. They will call good "evil" and evil "good." And these are just the beginning of the birth pangs of the new age.

In this confusing time, many will claim to speak for Jesus. They will claim to speak for God. They will push their own agendas. They will offer up their own ideas in place of God. They will promote selfishness and pride and narcissism. They will promote unrighteousness and lawlessness and unfettered freedom. They will sound so good that many will be led astray.

There will be abominations of desolation. Incredible acts of self-worship and idolatry that would make the ancient Canaanites blush. Worship will grow cold. Honoring God will become rare as people choose to do what feels good or what seems right in their own eyes. It will be like the days leading up to Noah. The days when the Judges reigned in Israel. Hatred. Rage. Violence. Pain. Suffering. All will become the norm as the world rebels against the authority of God.

Any of this sound familiar? How are we to respond as Christians? We respond the way my Ethiopian and Ugandan and South Sudanese brothers and sisters do. They endure to the end. They persevere in their faith. They cling to Jesus. They sacrifice it all for Him. Friends, Jesus couldn't be more clear. The world will hate us. The world will persecute us. Throw us into prison. Torture us and even kill us. They will restrict our rights. They will label the gospel "hate speech." They will make faithfulness to the law of God a hate crime. They will drag us into courts. They will put us on trial. They will do all they can to force us to abandon our faith. Things will get so bad that if they weren't cut short – if God somehow delayed His return – no one would be saved.

But make no mistake…God will return! Things will get so bad even nature itself will feel the effect. The sun will darken. The moon refuse to shine. It will seem like the stars have fallen out of the sky. And just when it seems like we cannot go on, Jesus will appear. He will come on the clouds with glory and power! A trumpet will sound and the angels will gather His family from the four corners of the earth. We do not know exactly when this day will come but we know it draws ever closer. Seemingly with every single breaking news story! Climate change. Political corruption. Racism and hatred. Economic upheaval globally. Now more than ever, the world stands on the brink.

So again, what's a Christian to do? Stay wise. Be prepared. Make sure we keep doing the work God assigned to us. Caring for the least among us. The hungry and thirsty. The naked and ashamed. The sick and imprisoned. As we care for them, we care for Jesus. Seek the lost. Fulfill the Great Commission. Take the gospel to every tribe, tongue, and nation in the world. This is the work the Master has assigned to us and when He comes again, may He find us faithful!

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 26:1-5, 14-35, Mark 14:1-2, 10-31, Luke 22:1-38, John 13

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November 4, 2022

Humility

Readings for today: Matthew 26:1-5, 14-35, Mark 14:1-2, 10-31, Luke 22:1-38, John 13

I remember one of the first times I washed another person's feet. I was in seminary at Princeton. I was working as a prison chaplain at New Jersey State Prison. I was leading a Bible study on Thursday nights and we were studying the gospels. When we got to today's readings about Jesus washing the disciple's feet, I pulled out a bucket and suggested we do the same for each other. The reaction was overwhelming. Several men started to weep. Some resisted but eventually gave in. Some were ashamed of what their feet looked and smelled like. One man was so overcome with emotion that he got up and walked to the corner of the room. It was a powerful moment for us all. After we were finished, we spent some time talking about why foot-washing is so hard for us and what we learned by following the command of Jesus that night. Here are just a few of our takeaways…

Foot-washing is humbling. We don't like being served. Being served places us in a passive position where we have little to no power. It makes us feel uncomfortable. Vulnerable. Exposed. We live in a culture where feet are largely covered up. We wear socks and shoes most of the time. Our feet are not considered the most beautiful or attractive parts of our bodies. They are sensitive to touch and heat and cold. The experience feels deeply intimate. Like something you would do with a close friend and we frankly don't have a lot of close friends.

Foot-washing turns power dynamics on their head. Several of the men remarked on how deeply it touched them to have a white, upper middle class, highly educated, non-incarcerated pastor kneeling before them to wash the feet of incarcerated, largely poor, black, lower-educated men. I felt the same way when our roles reversed and the men served me. There was a sense in which foot-washing placed us all on the same level as people in desperate need of the grace Jesus offers in Himself.

All of these dynamics were in play when Jesus took the towel after supper and tied it around His waist. He was intentionally taking the place of the humblest servant. He was performing the service that none of the rest of the disciples would ever want to perform. No one wants to wash feet! Especially in ancient near east culture where feet were grimy and dirty and calloused and rough from daily activity. The reaction of Simon Peter is a common one. "Lord, you will never wash my feet!" We don't want to be vulnerable. We don't want to be exposed. We don't want to be put in an uncomfortable position. But Jesus is relentless. He pursues us. He serves us in the deepest and most profound ways imaginable. And our spiritual condition doesn't seem to matter much to Him. He washes the feet of those who betray Him. Those who deny Him. Those who do not understand Him. Those who resist Him. He simply, lovingly, graciously kneels before us right where we are to wash us clean. This is His heart for us.

Readings for tomorrow: John 14-17

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November 5, 2022

Spiritual Unity

Readings for today: John 14-17

There is power in unity. There is power when God's people abide in Him. There is power when the Holy Spirit comes upon us. This power is not our own. It is a divine power. Tearing down every stronghold and every high thing that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. Tearing down every dividing wall of hostility that stands between us and God. It is the power of salvation for all who believe. It's a power that regenerates hearts. Justifies our very being. Sanctifies our lives. It is a power to make those orphaned by sin into children of the Most High. This is the power of God.

Jesus knew this power. Jesus drew on this power. Jesus understood this power. He lived in close, deep, intimate communion with His Father His entire life and He drew on this power constantly to heal, forgive, cast out demons, calm storms. He drew on this power when He multiplied the loaves and fishes and turned water into wine. He drew on this power when He suffered. Died. And this same power was at work when He was raised from the dead.

This is the power Jesus offers to those who follow Him. Throughout His farewell discourse in John 14-17, Jesus refers constantly to the unity He has with the Father and the unity desires to have with His people.

"If you had known me, you would have known my Father also."

"Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?"

"I will ask the Father, and he will give you…the Spirit of truth…You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you."

"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."

"In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."

"If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."

"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." (John 14:7, 10, 16-18, 20, 23, 15:5)

The gift Jesus offers us in Himself is beyond comprehension. He literally offers us the same power that created the universe. The same power that raised the dead. The same power that will one day bring all things together and make all things new. This same power is available to us through our relationship with Christ and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. This is why no weapon that is formed against us can stand. This is why no flaming arrows of the evil one can pierce the shield of faith. This is why we have nothing to fear. We abide in the Vine. We stand on the Rock. We drink from fountains of Living Water. Amen?

But what does union with Christ look like? Agreement. Submission. Surrender. It requires us to take our lives - all our thoughts, words, deeds, and desires - and align them with Jesus. Make His will our

own. Allow His Spirit to determine what is true and noble and right rather than continuing to do what is right in our own eyes.

As we draw close to Jesus, we will find ourselves drawing close to one another as well. The Body of Christ will discover a collective power in its unity that will make a huge impact on the world. I firmly believe this is the secret to the revival taking place in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, and Djibouti. Over 6,500 churches have been planted. Over 1 million lost people have been saved. God is changing the landscape in places like Gojo, Dire Dawa, and Borena. He is changing the landscape in Torit, South Sudan and in northern and southeastern Uganda. He is just getting started in Djibouti and will move into Somalia in the next few years. All because believers in these regions have put aside their differences and come together as one in Christ. Does this mean they agree on everything? Absolutely not! Unity is not the same as unanimity. No, their unity comes from a deeper source. A spiritual source. A well that never runs dry. Their common faith in Christ.

I love the words of Psalm 133. How good it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity. It is like precious oil that overflows. Dew that drenches the mountains, bringing new life. There God commands His blessing…life evermore! In these fractured and divided times, the church has a great opportunity to show the world the power of the gospel in our unity with Christ and each other. May we answer the call of Jesus' prayer.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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November 7, 2022

What Would Jesus Pray?

Reading for today: Matthew 26:36-75, Mark 14:32-72, Luke 22:39-71, John 18:1-27

I spent time in Israel this summer and of the places we visited was the house of Caiaphas. A church has been built on the spot where it once stood but you can still descend to the depths to a storeroom in the bedrock where Jesus most likely spent the night after being condemned. It's a powerful experience. As you stand at the very lowest point in the home, you can look upwards and see the opening in the roof above where they either lowered or more likely threw Jesus into the depths and darkness. The courtyard where Peter denies Him is just outside. Gethsemane where Judas betrayed Him is just down the hill. As you stand there, the guides encourage you to read aloud the words from Psalm 88. A psalm Jesus must have prayed as He cried out to His Father that night.

"O Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you. Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry! For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am a man who has no strength, like one set loose among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand. You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves. You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape; my eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call upon you, O Lord; I spread out my hands to you. Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you? Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon? Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? But I, O Lord, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am helpless. Your wrath has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together. You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness."

As I read those words in that place, I was deeply moved. I thought about my Lord and the "cup" His Father called Him to drink on my behalf. The cup of God's wrath. The cup of God's judgment. The cup I deserved. Jesus drank it to the dregs. He embraced His call to suffer on my behalf. To stand in my place. I abandoned Him just like His disciples. I betrayed Him just like Judas. I denied Him just like Peter. But He never abandoned me. He never betrayed me. He never denied me. He was faithful to His Father's will and now I am saved. I will never forget the overwhelming feeling of gratitude that flooded my heart in that moment. Read the words of the psalm again and ponder again all Jesus has done for you.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 27:1-31, Mark 15:1-20, Luke 23:1-25, John 18:28-40, 19:1-16

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November 8, 2022

Who Crucified Jesus?

Readings for today: Matthew 27:1-31, Mark 15:1-20, Luke 23:1-25, John 18:28-40, 19:1-16

Who crucified Jesus? Who was responsible for His suffering and death? Was it the Jewish people? Was it the religious authorities of His day? Was it the Romans? Pilate? All of the above? Certainly this passage has been used to justify some of the most horrific anti-semitism in history. Christians blaming the Jewish people for killing the Messiah. It's a terrible misreading of the passage. Not all Jews wanted Jesus dead. Not all Jews even knew who Jesus was. A much better reading is to identify Jesus as the victim of a corrupt, 1st century political system. Trapped between the competing interests of ambitious religious leaders and their Roman oppressors. Caught up in the nationalistic currents that were sweeping the nation at the time. He was one of many would-be messiahs who would be killed during this particular stretch in history in Israel as the Romans tried desperately to maintain peace in a region where tensions were rising.

Who crucified Jesus? For the Christian, the answer is clear. I did. I was the one who put Jesus on the cross. It was my sin that held Him there. It was my unrighteousness and my ungodliness that required a sacrifice. I have one to blame but myself. I cannot wash my hands of my responsibility. Jesus' pain was the price of my salvation. Jesus suffered to make atonement for my sin. Jesus died to deliver me from death. If no one else on earth had ever sinned, Jesus still would have given Himself for me.

Make no mistake, Jesus was no victim. This was His plan from the beginning. From eternity, He was predestined to serve. Predestined to suffer. Predestined to die. He was not forced to do it for no authority in heaven or on earth or under the earth has any power over Him. He was not moved to do it as if Jesus were driven by emotion like the rest of us. He was not even asked to do it as if He was some kind of divine "plan B" just in case things with humanity didn't work out. No, Jesus Himself says He alone has the power to lay His life down and take it back up again. Theologically speaking, Jesus has existed from eternity as the "crucified Lord" so in that sense one can argue that Jesus Himself is responsible for His suffering and death. He is the One who set these events in motion. He is the One who was bringing His plan to completion. Rather than cast blame, we should pause and marvel again at His great love and faithfulness.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 27:32-66, Mark 15:21-47, Luke 23:26-56, John 19:17-42, Psalm 22

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November 9, 2022

The Tomb

Readings for today: Matthew 27:32-66, Mark 15:21-47, Luke 23:26-56, John 19:17-42, Psalm 22

I will never forget the few minutes I got in the empty tomb. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is built over the place where Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus laid Jesus' body to rest. I know there is some debate between the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Garden Tomb but for my money, I think it far more likely Jesus was laid to rest at the church. The Sabbath was approaching. The men simply didn't have time to take his body down, prepare it as best they could, lay Him to rest, and get the tomb closed before the sun went down. The tomb had to be close to Golgotha.

When you enter the church, you have the opportunity to see where Jesus was crucified, where His body was anointed, and where He was laid to rest. Seeing all these spots grouped together makes a lot of sense when you think about it from a 1st century perspective. You then get in line to go into the tomb. You first enter an outer chamber where you can light a taper and say a prayer. You are then ushered into the inner sanctum where you can kneel in the tomb itself and lay your hand on the stone where His body lay. It's a powerful, powerful experience to say the least. I found myself weeping as I prayed. Overwhelmed by God's great love for me. Within a couple of minutes, a knock on the door signals the end of your time and you leave to make room for the next group of pilgrims to come in.

If you've been a Christian for any length of time, it's easy to breeze through these stories. We've heard them so many times and familiarity breeds contempt. We don't take the time or make the time to linger in them a bit. Sit with the words. Feel the force of their power. Imagine ourselves in the story. This is why so many go to Israel. Once you've been there, you'll never read the Bible the same way. It's like moving from analog to digital. Black and white to color. SD to 4k HD surround sound. It's truly amazing and I'd encourage anyone who can to go. If you cannot make the trip, do your best to take advantage of all the virtual tours that are offered online. Immerse yourself as much as possible in the experience. Let the power of the gospel speak to you in new and fresh ways and renew your love for Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21

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November 10, 2022

Resurrection

Readings for today: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21

Doubt. Fear. Astonishment. Confusion. Disbelief. This is the full range of emotions that swept the followers of Jesus that first Easter morning. No one - absolutely no one - was expecting a resurrection. They all believed it was over. Their hopes and dreams turned to dust. Some were returning home. Some were hiding out in fear. Some went to the tomb to mourn. All of them grieving in their own way.

It has been suggested over centuries that the disciples didn't know a dead body when they saw one. It has been suggested that Joseph and Nicodemus didn't realize Jesus was still alive. It has been suggested that Jesus merely swooned on the cross. Fainted. And in doing so, tricked the Roman soldiers - among the most brutal killers the world has ever known - into believing He was dead. It has been suggested that this same Jesus…body broken…incredibly weakened by blood loss…was somehow able to roll the stone away from within the tomb and escape. He then appeared to His followers and convinced them He was alive. Still others repeated the fake news the chief priests tried to spread about Jesus' disciples - fishermen and tax collectors - somehow stealing His body in the dead of night when the Roman guards were asleep. (Something that never happened by the way since the punishment for falling asleep on your watch was death.)

The resurrection of Jesus Christ stands as the seminal event in human history. It demands attention. It requires reflection. One cannot dismiss it or ignore it or pretend it didn't happen. If Jesus was raised from the dead then we have to take Him seriously. We have to consider every word that He said. We have to grapple with the truth He proclaimed about a Kingdom not of this world ruled by a God who loves the world despite it's sin and judges it with righteousness. We have to wrestle with what He has to say about the human condition. The sinful state of our hearts and our desperate need for forgiveness and grace. We have to listen to Him when He tells us how to repent of our stubborn, prideful, selfish ways. The resurrection validates everything about Jesus. His life. His teaching. His miracles. His suffering. His death. It is God's stamp of approval on the unique identity Jesus claimed for Himself as the Son of God.

This is the truth that confronted the disciples. Jesus, whom they saw die, was now alive. They got to see the wounds in His hands, feet, and side. (Notice in John 20:20 how they all needed this evidence before believing...not just Thomas.) And if Jesus was raised from the dead. If death could not hold Jesus. If the grave could not keep Jesus. What did that mean for their lives? How would that change their future? They realized there was now no going back. No returning back to life as they knew it. No more fishing boats and tax booths. God was on the move. This gospel must be proclaimed! They were being given a great commission to carry this news to the ends of the earth!

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 1-4, Psalm 110

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November 11, 2022

Repentance

Readings for today: Acts 1-4, Psalm 110

There is this great scene in Voyage of the Dawn Treader by C.S. Lewis where Eustace steals a bracelet and turns into a dragon. After initially enjoying the transformation, he soon realizes it is permanent and he is trapped with no hope of escape. He is terrified at the prospect and tries to cut the bracelet off but to no avail. Then Aslan appears. The mighty lion who is the Christ-figure in the story. He asks Eustace if he wants to be free. Eustace shakes his head in an emphatic "Yes!" Aslan stretches out his claws and cuts him to the bone. Strips him naked. Lays him bare. The cut is painful. Deep. It goes all the way to the heart. And yet it is necessary if Eustace is to be set free.

I'm always reminded of that particular scene when I read the response of the people to Peter's sermon. Luke, the author of Acts, says they were "cut to the heart." The full weight of what they had done to Jesus hit them like a ton of bricks. They were heartbroken. They were devastated. And they asked Peter what they should do. "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

Repent. Literally a 180 degree turn in your life. A radical re-orientation of your heart away from the Kingdom of Self towards the Kingdom of God. A radical redirection of your desires. Whereas once you were prideful, arrogant, self-absorbed, greedy, filled with negativity and anger and lusts of all kinds. Those desires are now crucified with Christ and in exchange you receive love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and goodness and mercy. Repentance means a radical re-evaluation of your priorities. Whereas once you focused on safety, security, and chasing personal happiness. Now you lay those aside in favor of generosity, service, and sacrifice for the sake of God's Kingdom. There is no middle ground. No keeping one eye on heaven while fixing the other here on earth. No standing with one foot in the kingdoms of this world and one foot in the Kingdom that is to come. Repentance represents a total commitment. A complete shift in one's allegiances and loyalties.

Baptism. The primary sign of this shift in allegiance takes place in baptism. Baptism is where we publicly declare our faith in Christ and align ourselves with His Kingdom. We proclaim to the world that we are no longer our own. We no longer serve ourselves. We no longer live according to the corrupt values of our sinful culture. We are in Christ. Our lives have now been taken up into His life. Our future is in His hands. Our resources are His to do with as He chooses. We are simply His servants. Sent out in His name to fulfill His purposes in this world.

Gift of the Holy Spirit. Thankfully, God doesn't send us alone. He doesn't send us our ill-prepared. He doesn't send us out helpless or hopeless. He Himself goes with us. He gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit who comes and takes up residence in our hearts. He imparts all the gifts we need to succeed in Christ's service. He strengthens us for every battle. He encourages us in the face of every challenge. He gives us joy in every trial. He grants all the wisdom and understanding we need to make sense of His calling on our lives. The Holy Spirit is quite literally the greatest gift we could ever receive.

Repent. Be baptized. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is what it means to respond in faith to the work Christ has done on our behalf.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 5-8

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November 12, 2022

Reformation

Readings for today: Acts 5-8

There is a new Reformation taking place. According to scholars like Philip Jenkins, the church of the 21st century will be traditional in its ethics, orthodox in its doctrine, supernatural in its power, and centered in the Global South. Africa will have over 1 billion Christians by 2050. Latin America over 650 million. Asia over 600 million. The growth of Christianity in North America will continue to slow to a crawl and will face steep decline in Europe. As the faces of Christianity change, one will expect the influence of theologians and pastors and ministry leaders from these areas of the world to begin dominating the landscape. No longer will the theological tone be set by the Reformation of the 16th century in Western Europe but by the Reformation taking place in Ethiopia, Uganda, China, Nigeria, Brazil and Mexico. This new movement is decidedly Pentecostal. It is boldly Charismatic. The preaching of the gospel in these countries is often accompanied by signs and wonders and miracles. It all sounds very "New Testament" to me.

In our readings for today, we see signs and wonders all over the place. From the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira for lying to the Holy Spirit to the healings by the apostles at Solomon's Portico. Stephen, a man full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit, performing great signs and wonders as he preaches the gospel. Philip driving out demons left and right. How awesome must it have been to be part of this movement in its earliest days? To see the miracles taking place? To watch as scores of people get saved on a daily basis? Worship services filled with new believers? Homes filled to overflowing with spiritual seekers? Everyone of one heart and one mind even in the face of persecution?

Why doesn't this happen in America? Why doesn't this happen in our local communities? What are we missing? I believe what we are missing is desperation for God. A hunger and thirst for His righteousness. An overwhelming longing for His Kingdom. Affluence is a spiritual killer. It makes us soft and complacent. We have enough so we don't need God. We have doctors and nurses and medication and treatment so we don't need miraculous healing. We have psychologists and psychiatrists and an abundance of counselors to help us deal with our demons. We have plenty of food and clean water to drink. Warm homes to sleep in and closets full of clothes. We receive great education at the finest of schools. Our economy is the strongest in the world so everyone can have a job. What do we need God for? (I am purposefully engaging in hyperbole here. Obviously, there are deep complexities involved especially as it relates to mental illness.) This is why Jesus Himself will say it is harder for a rich person to get into heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Basically it is impossible because we become so attached to the things of this world. Our primary concern becomes safety and comfort rather than the proclamation of the gospel. Our primary goal becomes taking care of ourselves first or those we love rather than the lost. We start walking by sight rather than by faith so is it really any wonder then that we don't see the signs and wonders and miracles of God?

Thankfully what is impossible for us is more than possible for God! And His great desire is for us to experience all the spiritual blessings He has stored up in heaven for His people. (Eph. 1:3) So the image I want to leave you with is Jesus standing out on the lake, having walked on water. You and I are sitting comfortably in our yachts and Jesus is beckoning to us. Calling us out. Calling us out of our comfort zones. Calling us out of our safe spaces. Calling us to leave behind our wealth and possessions. To come out of the gilded cages we find ourselves trapped in and go to him. Actually walk on water ourselves as we fix our eyes on Him. This is not an easy journey. Almost as soon as we leave the safety

of our boats, we start to feel the waves rocking and rolling beneath us. We see the wind kick up and the clouds move in. The temptation is to run back to safety. Run back to what we know. Run back to what is comfortable and normal for us. But Jesus is insistent. He is relentless. His voice booms out over the waters. His voice rises above the storm. “Come to me!” He says. Let go of all you have. Unclench those fists. Relinquish your need for control. Come out to where I am and you will see My signs. My wonders. My miracles. For I am Faithful. I am True. I will not let you sink beneath the waves.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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November 14, 2022

The Beauty of a Multi-Cultural Community

Readings for today: Acts 9-11

I remember the first truly multicultural worship service I attended. It was in Chicago. In a Hispanic community called La Villita that is located within the larger African-American community of Lawndale. It was a violent place. Rival gangs running the streets. When kids came to youth group, they had to be picked up in vans with blacked out windows because they crossed gang lines. I was in college at the time and we sent a team to serve a local church in the community over Spring Break. We arrived on Saturday and attended worship on Sunday. That particular Sunday, they had done a pulpit swap with a local African-American church. So the preacher and choir were black. The congregation was mainly poor, immigrant Hispanics who only spoke Spanish. And our group was made up of privileged, white college students from Boulder, CO. We got to witness a miracle that day. As the preacher got rolling - as only African-American preachers can!!! - the translator tried his best to keep up. But as the sermon began to crescendo, this incredible thing happened. The translator sat down. The Spirit descended. I watched as everyone heard this man preach in their own language. It was clear that even the Spanish-speakers in our midst were tracking. It was like Pentecost. It was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

God's plan was always to move beyond the confines of the Promised Land and the Jewish ethnic group to reach the Gentile nations. In fact, this was part of the initial promise God first gave to Abraham! In him, all the nations of the earth would be blessed! And it is precisely this promise that is being re-affirmed in the vision Peter receives from the Lord. What was once unclean is now clean. What was once unholy is now holy. What was once excluded is now included. The Gentiles who had been separated from God were now going to be grafted in. Those who were not God's people were now going to be part of God's people. Centuries of racial prejudice were erased in a moment as God sends Peter to Cornelius to lead him to saving faith. The dividing wall of hostility has been torn down. Now the gospel will go forth to the entire world. Every tribe. Every tongue. Every nation will have the opportunity to receive Christ. This is the heartbeat of the Great Commission, the underlying theme of the entire Book of Acts, and the main issue Paul will address in every single one of his letters. Jews and Gentiles living together as one family under God.

Friends, God hates racism. Hates racial segregation. Hates how His family has divided along racial lines. His desire is that all should be saved and not only come to a knowledge of His truth but then join together in authentic community as one family. This is not easy. Sunday morning is still one of the most segregated hours in our country. We have a very difficult time building friendships across racial/ethnic lines. We much prefer to gather with people who look like us, live like us, think like us. Sitting down with someone who comes from a radically different life experience is very challenging. We struggle to listen. We struggle to honor them. We struggle to communicate value and friendship because so often their perspective feels threatening to us. All this was true for the early Christians as well. The Jews who first came to faith could not imagine believing in Jesus without circumcision. Could not fathom following Christ without also following the Law. They had been taught for generations that Gentiles were unclean and unholy and to avoid contact with them at all costs. Now God was doing a new thing. Now Jews were being called to embrace Gentiles as their brothers and sisters. The Holy Spirit was being poured out in undeniable ways. How would they respond?

How do we respond? Over the years, I have been blessed with spiritual mentors and friends from a variety of ethnicities and social/economic backgrounds. I have spent time with the urban poor. Been in

their homes. Listened to their stories. Heard their struggles. I have spent time in prisons and with ex-convicts who tell me how hard it is to reintegrate back into life after serving their time. The lack of jobs. The probation process. How easy it is to recitivate because at least the prison system is familiar. I have spent time with African-American friends who have helped me understand what it's like to have to grow up guarded and suspicious because you cannot trust the justice system. I have spent time with Hispanic friends who've shared with me stories of racial animus that breaks my heart. I have spent time with Asian-American friends who tell me of the challenges they've faced as they transitioned from their home country to the USA. More recently, I've listened to Ethiopian refugees share their stories of what it's like to seek asylum in our country. It's overwhelming.

The gospel is designed by God to bring us together. It has divine power to tear down every stronghold, every wall, every division that keeps us apart. The gospel gives us the courage to honor one another in our differences. God delights in the diversity of His family. God's goal is not to make us all color-blind or erase our racial identities. The gospel does not turn us all into one homogeneous lump of clay. Rather it grounds our fundamental identity in Christ which in turn allows to celebrate the beauty and genius of the palate God used to create human beings in the first place! The goal of the gospel is not a post-racial community but one that is inclusive of all races, each with their own unique perspective and experience.

How do we get started? By simply reaching out. Being intentional. Engaging someone who is not like us in conversation. Listening more than speaking. Withholding the tendency we all have to judge someone else's experience or perceive it as a threat. Cultivating the humility to learn. Willingly relinquishing power and privilege in order to create a safe space for people to share. It's not easy but the gospel makes it possible. In fact, the gospel mandates it.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 12-14

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November 15, 2022

Missionaries

Readings for today: Acts 12-14

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

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

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

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

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

Shot. Imprisoned. Left for dead. Their families are attacked. Their livelihoods threatened. Some of them even lose their lives for the sake of the Kingdom. And yet, the “the Word of God continues to increase and multiply!” (Acts 12:24)

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

Readings for tomorrow: James 1-5

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November 16, 2022

Authentic Faith

Readings for today: James 1-5

One of the great scandals of the western church is the number of Christians who confess Jesus with their lips but deny Him with their lives. They say they believe in Jesus but only in the abstract. They claim to have faith in God but only if He remains distant and uninvolved in our lives. They claim saving faith but never submit their lives to Christ. We call them "nominal" Christians. "C&E" (Christmas and Easter) Christians. "Cultural" Christians. Mainly because we don't want to appear judgmental. The Apostle James, on the other hand, pulls no punches. "Faith apart from works is dead." (James 2:26)

What does it mean to believe in God? The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 10:9, "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." That seems clear enough except that far too many use this verse as an excuse NOT to obey God's commands which certainly wasn't what Paul had in mind. Clearly in James' day, he was dealing with Christians who claimed a right belief in God but didn't follow it up with right practice. This is why James makes this extraordinary statement, "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!" (James 2:19) He's speaking to both the Jewish and Gentile believers of his own time and pointing out it isn't enough to hold to an intellectual belief in the nature and character of God. Even the demons understand God's divine nature! One must submit their life to God as well.

His argument is a persuasive one and deeply biblical. For support, he draws on the Abraham, the great paradigm of faith, and Rahab who ended up in the lineage of Christ. He makes the point that saving faith in their lives resulted in works. In fact, one would not be able to say that "Abraham believed God" unless Abraham willingly demonstrated that belief by offering up his only beloved son. In the same way, one would not be able to say that "Rahab believed God" unless she willingly demonstrated that belief by hiding the spies of Israel and sending the authorities on a wild goose chase. In both cases, faith was active alongside their works and faith came to completion or fulfillment by their works.

Now I can already hear the protests. What about grace? I thought we were saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone? Absolutely we are! But what is equally clear is that salvation changes us. It transforms us. It gives us a new heart with new desires. A new spirit with new passions. We find ourselves longing to do God's will. Longing to serve God's purposes. Longing to follow God's commands. Jesus Himself says, "If you love me, keep my commandments." (John 14:15)

When we try to separate our faith from our works, we are exposing our lack of authentic faith. If we approach faith looking for the absolute minimum we need to do to be saved, we are not saved at all. It's like trying to separate the body from the soul according to James. Such a dis-integration of the human being would result in death. The same is true when we try to separate our faith from our works.

Readings for tomorrow: Galatians 1-3

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November 17, 2022

What does it Mean to be Truly Human?

Readings for today: Galatians 1-3

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Galatians 4-6

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November 18, 2022

Exercising Christian Freedom

Readings for today: Galatians 4-6

"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." - Galatians 5:1

We are born into sin. On this point the Bible is clear. We are not born innocent. We are not born neutral. We are not a "tabula rasa" when we come into this world. We are slaves. Enslaved to the elementary powers of this world. Demonic powers of darkness whose influence is far-reaching and against whom we are powerless in our natural state. We are enslaved to our own desires. Desires that, though originally God-given, have become twisted and disoriented and corrupted by sin. We are enslaved to idols. These are the things we fear losing the most. They are often the source of recurring nightmares. And we spend a ton of energy protecting them against any threats. How do we know we are enslaved? The test is fairly simple. If you are willing to commit sin in order to achieve some goal, fulfill some desire, or protect some asset or ideology, you are enslaved.

Thankfully, Christ has set us free. He has set us free by defeating the demonic powers of darkness through His atoning death on the cross and resurrection from the dead. He has set us free by giving us a new heart with new desires to replace the corrupt hearts of stone with which we were born. He has set us free by dethroning the idols of our lives and establishing His reign and rule over our lives. This is why the Apostle Paul tells his Galatian friends not to submit again to a yoke of slavery. If Christ has done all this work for you, why would you ever want to go back? Why would you choose to return to paganism? Or a life under the Law? Why would you choose to subject yourself to anything but the Spirit of God?

Now I can already hear the pushback. What about those who would choose to use their freedom as an opportunity to sin? Paul is equally clear here as well. "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh but through love serve one another." (Galatians 5:13) The freedom Christ offers us is not just a freedom "from" something but also a freedom "to" something. We are set free in order to serve. We are set free in order to love. We are set free in give our lives for the sake of those around us. And this is not something we do in our own effort. We do it by embracing and walking with the Holy Spirit. "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." (Galatians 5:16) If you and I walk hand in hand and keep in step with the Spirit of God, we will not pursue sin. It will hold no attraction for us. It will have no power over us. Instead, we will be producing fruit like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The more we produce the fruit of the Spirit, the less room there is for the weeds of sin to grow.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 15-16

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November 19, 2022

Navigating Church Conflict

Readings for today: Acts 15-16

Church fights are the worst. We have such a hard time “keeping the main thing, the main thing.” How many different denominations have sprung up over disagreements about Christ’s presence at the Lord’s Table? The mode and timing of baptism? Who’s eligible to serve in ordained office? Differing views over eschatology? The exercise or even existence of ecstatic spiritual gifts? Some estimate there are over 45,000 different Christian denominations globally. Each one claiming a nuanced theological view that sets them apart from their brothers and sisters. It must break the heart of Christ.

Imagine how different things would be if we simply followed the example of the early church. In those days, there could not have been a more explosive theological issue than circumcision. Circumcision had been the mark of God’s covenant people for thousands of years. It was the sign that set them apart. Thousands had died over the centuries rather than renounce circumcision and the faith it signified. The early believers - almost all of whom were Jewish - didn’t have a theological category for “uncircumcised believer.” It would have been an oxymoron to them. But then Paul and Barnabas show up. Two highly respected church leaders and missionaries. They start testifying to the fact that the Holy Spirit was being poured out on the Gentiles and this created all kinds of conflict. Now, in today’s world, we’d just pack up and head to the church down the street. We’d withdraw from fellowship. Our church would vote to secede and go independent, join a different denomination, or perhaps start their own. But that’s not what the early church did. Why?

They kept the main thing, the main thing. They understood the church’s primary mission was the preaching of the gospel. Nothing could be allowed to hijack the Great Commission. Not theological disputes over circumcision or uncircumcision. Not the historic ethnic divisions between Jews and Gentiles. Not persecution from their pagan oppressors or their Jewish countrymen. So when it came to the attention of the leaders of the church that there was a significant conflict brewing, they called for a council in Jerusalem. They listened to passionate arguments from either side. They acknowledged the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. They trusted the testimonies of Paul and Barnabas about the miraculous signs and wonders they had seen and performed. They searched the Scriptures for confirmation of God’s plan. And finally, they reinforced the demands of the moral law governing worship, fellowship, human sexuality which has formed the communal ethic of the church since her earliest days. Does this mean all their problems where solved? Clearly not. Paul and Barnabas get into it over the inclusion of John Mark. Paul, knowing he will be preaching to Jews on his next missionary journey, makes the decision to circumcise Timothy before they go so he won’t present a stumbling block to the gospel. Their journey is re-routed by the Holy Spirit from Bithynia to Macedonia. They end up in prison for casting out a demon. It’s a crazy, wild ride! And yet, the church remained united in their focus to evangelize the nations.

Imagine what would happen if we would do the same! Imagine a church that humbled herself under the authority of the Holy Spirit who blows where He wills and always does a new thing. Imagine believers submitting their will and personal experience to Scripture and the wisdom of the gathered Christian community. Imagine a church who kept the main thing, the main thing, and refused to let anything get in the way of the proclamation of the gospel. This is what Jesus wants from His church, friends.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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November 21, 2022

Defending our Faith

Readings for today: Acts 17:1-18:18

One of the more common misunderstandings in Acts is Paul's appearance before the Areopagus in Athens. Because of Luke's editorial comment, "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21); there is this assumption that Paul was appearing before a kind of debate society. Nothing could be farther from the truth. New Testament scholar, NT Wright, points out in his most recent biography of the Apostle Paul that the "Areopagus" was actually the Athenian Supreme Court. Paul was being charged as a "preacher of foreign divinities" which is actually the same charge that condemned Socrates. As such, Paul had a lot more at stake than winning an argument. His life was on the line. In a very real sense, the validity of the Christian faith was on the line as well.

Paul's defense of his faith is brilliant. Marks him as one of the pre-eminent intellectuals of the ancient world. He truly belongs in the same pantheon as Plato and Aristotle and Cicero. "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." (Acts 17:22-23) Paul understands that God has revealed Himself in all kinds of ways. As pagan as the Athenians were, one thing that could be affirmed was their desire for God. They built all kinds of shrines to all kinds of false gods and while this practice was idolatrous, Paul was able to see past the surface to the deeper reality of their spiritual hunger. He plays on this spiritual hunger by affirming their search and uses it as a springboard to present the gospel. He even goes on to quote their own poets back to them, demonstrating how widely read and engaged he was with Hellenistic culture. This is remarkable for a former Pharisee and deeply instructive for us.

It is so easy in our world to fall into the trap of fundamentalism. Believing our way is the only way and any deviation represents a departure from truth. Fundamentalism infects both progressives and conservatives. It seems to touch ever debate these days whether the issue is race, sexuality, gender, abortion, etc. We cast these conversations in sharp binaries. We demand grace and nuance for our position but refuse to extend that same courtesy out to others. We spend so much of our time and energy dissecting every single tweet, FB post, or IG story in an effort to uncover deception. We assume the worst about the motivations of our opponents. We seem to feed off the negative energy.

You might have heard the saying - oft attributed to Benjamin Franklin - that a "half-truth is a great lie." You might even agree with such a statement. However, there is a flip side. A half-truth does contain half a truth. And in our rush to point out the "lie" we often miss the opportunity to affirm what may be true and noble and right. This is especially important when engaging seekers. Those engaged in an authentic search for God. They have legitimate questions. Important concerns that need to be heard. Doubts and fears that need to be expressed and taken seriously. Not dismissed. Not diminished. Paul affirms what he can about the Athenians. He affirms their religious hunger. Their spiritual thirst. Paul sees the half-truth reflected in their shrine to the "unknown god" and he makes Him known to them. Even though he is on trial for his life, Paul is so confident in Christ that he finds a way past self-defense and instead uses his time on the witness stand to share Jesus.

Every day our faith is put on trial. By the people we meet, work, and interact with on a regular basis. They ask all kinds of questions. Make all kinds of assumptions. Issue all kinds of statements. As

Christians, we can spend our time and energy deconstructing everything they have to say. Pointing out the intellectual and spiritual inconsistencies. We can focus on winning the argument or we can focus on winning the person's heart. Asking good clarifying questions. Honoring what we can about their beliefs. Pointing out where their truth may unwittingly intersect with the Truth of the gospel. Because our confidence flows from Christ, we don't have to take things personal. Don't have to be defensive. Don't have to feel threatened. We are at peace because we know Jesus has overcome the world and is making Himself known.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Thessalonians 1-5

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November 22, 2022

World-Changing Faith

Readings for today: 1 Thessalonians 1-5

“For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.” (1 Thessalonians 1:4-8)

I cannot imagine a greater compliment than to be told that my witness had “sounded forth” throughout the region I live and my faith in God had “gone forth everywhere” so that the need for evangelism ceased. And yet this is exactly what happened through the Christians at Thessalonica. Paul and Silas (Silvanus) traveled through their city on their way to Athens. They stopped and peached for three consecutive Saturdays on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Many Jews and Greeks and several leading women came to faith as the Word came in power and authority and conviction. However, some disbelieved and they stirred up a mob to attack Paul and Silas. When they could not find them, they attacked Jason and a few others. Dragging them out of their homes into the streets. They brought them before the city authorities with the hope they would be charged with treason for proclaiming a king other than Caesar but Jason paid off the officials and they were released. They then helped Paul and Silas escape during the night. This is the affliction Paul is referencing in his letter to them. But despite the persecution, they held onto to their joy in the Holy Spirit and clearly remained steadfast in their faith to the point that their reputation had spread thus making a return trip from Paul unnecessary.

I love how the crowd puts it in Acts 17:6, “These men have turned the world upside down...” Would that we would live such gospel-centered lives that we too might be accused of such a thing! Turning the world upside down is exactly what the gospel does. It completely reorders all we love. It redirects all our thoughts and desires. It reorients all our priorities. The things we used to hold dear no longer have much of a hold on us. The idols we cling to so tightly become empty and worthless. All our pride and achievement and cast down before the throne of Jesus. All our wealth and privilege and influence and power pales in comparison to the riches and authority Christ offers us in Himself. Our concern for our reputation and the esteem of others diminishes as our fear of God increases. This is what happens when we come to Christ. He fills us with His love. His affections. His joy. His peace. His righteousness. As these things begin to flow in and through our lives, we are transformed. We are renewed. We are set free. And because we have been set free, this world no longer has anything for us. No longer has any leverage over us. No longer can threaten to undo us. For we live for Christ and if we die, we gain!

So what does this all mean for you today? How are you turning the world upside down at your work or school? In your home or neighborhood? As you gather around your table with friends and family for Thanksgiving, what will the conversation sound like? Will the people you spend time feel blessed for having been with you? Will they hear and experience the love of Jesus through you? Will you set the example for those who do not yet believe through your sacrifice and willingness to serve?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Thessalonians 1-3

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November 23, 2022

Persecution

Readings for today: 2 Thessalonians 1-3

Amidst a rising tide of persecution and affliction, the faith of the Thessalonian Christians was rising. Their love for each other was growing. These are not surprising developments for anyone familiar with church history. In the face of hostility, the church seems to flourish. In the face of threat or danger or torture or even death itself, the church only grows more bold. Consider the witness of the underground church in Iran today which may be the fastest growing church in the world. Consider the witness of the underground church in China which may be the largest "Christian" nation in the world. Consider the revival taking place in the Horn of Africa among the Muslims who live there as church planters risk their lives to preach the gospel to them. It's simply amazing.

This is why the Apostle Paul boasts about the Thessalonian church wherever he goes on his missionary journeys. He wants the churches he plants to follow their example. He wants them to be encouraged in the face of opposition. He wants them to show the same steadfastness and faith that their brothers and sisters have shown amidst all the persecutions and afflictions they were enduring. It's the same in our world today. It's why I love coming home to share about what I have seen over in Africa. Recently, I even had an elder in our church tell me, "I wish we could bottle up a little bit of the Holy Spirit energy you bring back with you to give to everyone here." He's not wrong. That's my desire as well.

Now let me be clear. There was nothing superhuman about the Thessalonian Christians. There is nothing superhuman about the Iranian or Chinese or African Christians in our world today. The power to endure hostility and affliction and persecution does not come from us. It comes from God and it is His call to every single Christian. Friends, we simply do not have the power to live the Christian life on our own. We do not have the will or the discipline to make it happen. Left to our own devices, we will struggle. Left to our own resources, we will fall. Trusting in our own strength, we will fail. Living the Christian life is not a matter of learning some new techniques. It's not a matter of turning over a new leaf. It is about transformation. Total-life transformation from the inside out and it is the work of God.

Jump down to verses 11-12 of the first chapter. Here Paul prays for three things for his Thessalonian friends. All of them come from God. Not a single one is rooted in the human heart. He prays God will make them worthy of His calling. Essentially, he is praying for God's Spirit to so root and ground them in the righteousness of Christ that every facet of their lives - home, community, work, school, etc. - would reflect His glory. He prays their lives might become a living reflection of the reality God has already brought about through their salvation in Jesus Christ. In Christ we are the very righteousness of God. Those called by Christ are constantly being formed and re-formed into His image, thereby being made worthy of the initial call God placed on their lives when He first saved them.

The second thing Paul prays for is for God to fulfill their every resolve for good. Each and every day, we are faced with a fundamental choice. Will I live for God or will I live for me? Will I live selflessly or selfishly? Will I seek to honor God or will I gratify the desires of the sinful nature? This fundamental choice works itself out in lots of different situations in every facet of our lives. It pops up in every conversation. Every task assigned to us. Every chore we perform. Every interaction we have with another divine image-bearer who crosses our path. However it manifests itself, the fundamental choice is always the same. Will we do good or evil? And because we are predisposed through our sinful nature to do evil, we need God's help to do good.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 18:19-19:41

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November 24, 2022

A Social/Political Gospel

Readings for today: Acts 18:19-19:41

Happy Thanksgiving! As many gather around tables for food and fellowship today, there are certain subjects bound to be off-limits. Politics. Religion. Hot-button cultural issues. Then again, maybe your family is like mine and we enjoy these conversations. We have strong people with many strong opinions and the conversation can be fiery at times. ;-) Our number one is rule is that we can talk about anything, provided we remain respectful, humble, and loving towards each other. Sadly, far too many of us have a hard time navigating these kinds of conversations. The result is deep brokenness, hurt feelings, and a spoiled holiday.

I often experience the same challenges in the church. On the one hand it's not surprising. Healthy churches are full of people from all kinds of different backgrounds and life experiences. They are strung out along a spectrum of spiritual maturity. Some are brand new to the faith and just learning to walk like Jesus. Others have been walking with Jesus for years and have more practice. It makes for a difficult environment as people try to apply the gospel to their lives. It's equally challenging to apply the gospel to the culture around us. How many times have I heard the comment, "why can't the preacher just stick to the gospel?" Why does he or she have to bring politics into worship? Or social justice? Or economics? As my southern friends used to say, "Stick to preachin'! Stay away from meddlin'!" The problem with this approach is clear when you read passages like the one we read for today. We've already seen how the early Christians were accused of "turning the world upside down" with their preaching of the gospel. It is impossible to separate the preaching of the gospel from the implications of the gospel. Preaching Jesus by definition challenges our notions of justice, power, social class, economics, etc. because He Himself challenged those same things through His preaching and the apostles followed His example.

Ephesus was one of the great cities of Asia Minor in the 1st century. A commercial trading center. A major port. In the early second century, the great library of Celsus was built here, housing over 12,000 scrolls and putting Ephesus on the map alongside Alexandria as one of the main centers of learning in the ancient world. It had an amphitheater that held over 25,000 spectators. But perhaps the greatest draw was the famed Temple of Artemis. One of the seven wonders of the world. Pilgrims came from all over to pay their respects to the great goddess. As a result, tradesmen and craftsmen made a lot of money supporting the cult by selling idols and little shrines for the people to carry home with them. Enter the Apostle Paul. He comes preaching the gospel of a God not made with human hands. A God who cannot be represented by idols here on earth. A God who is the maker of heaven and earth. A God greater than Artemis (the moon goddess) and many of her former adherents came to faith. Sales drop. Profits crumble. Money is lost. A riot ensues as the entire economic structure of the city is now in danger.

Such accusations are nothing new to Paul. He's already been accused of preaching a "king other than Caesar." He's already been accused of treason and sedition. He's already been accused of upending entire social systems and ways of life. He's already been accused of blasphemy by his fellow Jews. No wonder he'll remark to his Corinthians friends, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." (2 Corinthians 4:8-10) Paul understands to preach the gospel places one at odds with the social systems of this world. The economic systems of this world. The political systems of this world. The

gospel is the good news of a different Kingdom. A Kingdom that is in this world but not of this world. A Kingdom ruled from a heavenly throne not an earthly one. A Kingdom driven by eternal values not temporal ones. A Kingdom that is pure and noble and righteous. A Kingdom unwilling to compromise with the sinful and broken ways of this world. So one cannot preach without meddlin' in politics, social systems, economics, and justice. The gospel cannot be privatized. Jesus will not rest until He is Lord over every facet of human existence. Until every knee bows in heaven, on earth, and under the earth and every tongue confesses that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 1-4

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November 25, 2022

Thanksgiving

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 1-4

Today is a bonus day for many people in my country. It's part of a four day weekend of celebration with friends and family. Many use this time to sleep in. Eat leftovers from the Thanksgiving feast they enjoyed yesterday. Decorate for Christmas. Shop the "Black Friday" sales. Of course, not everyone has the day off. Some will head back to work. Someone has to man the stores for those who shop. First responders will continue to keep our communities safe. Doctors and nurses will treat patients. Airline pilots and flight attendants will start flying people back home on what promises to be another busy weekend at the airports.

Though the Thanksgiving holiday may be coming to a close, our passage for today reminds us that "Thanksgiving" is more of a lifestyle than a one day event. It's more an attitude of the heart than a meal around a table with those we love. I love how Paul begins almost every one of his letters with thanksgiving. "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in Him in all speech and all knowledge - even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you - so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." (1 Corinthians 1:4-9)

The Corinthian Christians were a mess. They were immoral. They were divisive. They were prideful and greedy. They were broken in all sorts of ways and yet Paul thanks God for them. He thanks God for the grace given them. For the spiritual gifts poured out on them. For the testimony of Christ among them. It's a great reminder that no matter how broken our churches may become, Christ is faithful. He will sustain us to the end. He will present us guiltless at the final day before the throne.

Yesterday, I gave thanks for many things. My family. My friends. The wonderful church I serve. The opportunities I've been given. Most of all, I gave thanks to God for the grace He has poured out on me. Without Christ, there's a strong chance I would be an alcoholic. Working odd jobs struggling to make ends meet. No marriage. No kids. No career. I was aimless before I met Jesus. I was lost and wandering with no sense of purpose or direction. Then Christ came into my life and changed everything. He enriched me in more ways than I deserve. He lavished gifts on me that I did not earn. He provided opportunities for me I could never have achieved on my own. My life is radically different because of what Jesus did for me so I take time to thank Him. Every single day. I hope you will as well.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 5-8

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November 26, 2022

And Such Were Some of You…

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 5-8

One of the real challenges for the American church today is to overcome the perception that we are hostile and judgmental towards those who do not believe like us. Far too often, the loudest "Christian" voices seem to be the ones that are the harshest and most combative. I think of the preachers who get platformed on cable news or social media. They often make sweeping statements against entire groups of people due to their political beliefs or lifestyle choices. They are known more for what they are against than who they are for. They are often hypocritical, refusing to apply the same litmus tests to those they support or those who can get them access to power and wealth and influence. They are selective in their judgments, tending to elevate some sins and not others. And while this is an effective approach if one wishes to gain followers, likes, clicks, etc. It is counter-productive when it comes to spreading the gospel.

If only we could collectively remember where God found us. If only we could collectively remember how far God has brought us. If only we could remember the depth and depravity of our own sin perhaps we'd be more humble and gentle in our approach. In our reading for today, Paul addresses the pride of the Corinthian Christians. Though God has richly blessed them with every spiritual blessing, they have weaponized their spiritual gifts against each other. They have divided over who is the most holy. Factions have formed around wealth and influence or the lack thereof. It's heartbreaking. "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the Kingdom of God. And such were some of you…" (1 Corinthians 6:9-11a) Paul could easily have gone on to list a thousand more sins but his point is made. All of the Corinthians have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. All of them are unrighteous and therefore unworthy of the Kingdom of God. All of them were without hope of salvation until God delivered them through the shed blood of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. They were washed in His blood. They were sanctified by His Spirit. They were justified by His atoning death on the cross. It is only by God's grace that the Corinthians have any faith at all so who are they to condemn those around them?

Yes, we should flee immorality. Yes, we should not turn a blind eye to the sin in our midst. Judgment begins at the house of God according to 1 Peter 4:17. But at the same time, we recognize we are not judge, jury, or executioner. It is not our job to pass judgment and condemn those around us. We are not given such authority. Our job is simply to speak the truth in love. To hold each other accountable with grace and truth. To walk with each other openly and honestly and transparently. Always seeking to build up rather than tear down. Always seeking to repay evil with good. Always offering a gentle answer to turn away wrath. How I wish Christians would listen to the Apostle James when he says, "The anger of man cannot bring about the righteousness of God." (James 1:20) Two wrongs never make a right. Sin never produces righteousness. An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind. (Gandhi) Would that we could remember our own spiritual blindness and ignorance as we respond to the brokenness and pain and suffering and injustice and unrighteousness of the world around us! Perhaps it would result in more humility and grace and a greater, more effective witness for the gospel.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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November 28, 2022

Laying Down Our Lives

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 9-11

As Americans, we believe every human being is endowed with inalienable rights. Among these are a right to life. A right to liberty. A right to pursue happiness. These rights are enshrined in our Constitution. They are explored in further detail in our Bill of Rights. Indeed, one could say our entire legal code is an attempt to flesh out how we define our "rights." We have "bills of rights" for taxpayers, patients, students, etc. When we arrest people for crimes, the first thing we do is tell them their rights. We advocate in the global community for the enforcement of human rights and we often take action if we feel such rights are violated. Most of our hottest political debates center around what we perceive to be "human rights." Even on an individual level, we cling to our "rights" and react strongly if we feel they are being infringed upon or violated.

The Apostle Paul could not be more different. Because he believes with all his heart that he is saved by the grace of Christ, he willingly surrenders all his rights for the greater glory of the gospel. Paul has every "right" to assert his authority as an apostle. Every "right" to get married. Every "right" to work for a living. Indeed, he has every "right" to make his living off the gospel just like the Levitical priests. Paul has every "right" to eat or drink whatever he wants since God has set aside the kosher food laws of the Old Testament. He has every "right" to circumcise or not circumcise, depending on the situation. If Paul were to assert his "rights", he could claim a privileged place as a Jew among Jews, "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." (Phil. 3:4-6) But Paul is more than willing to relinquish all of his rights...why? Because "he counts everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ." (Philippians 3:8)

Part and parcel of becoming a Christian means waiving whatever rights we believe we are entitled to as human beings or American citizens or whatever other identity we hold so dear. We have to be willing to lay these things down for the greater privilege of serving Christ. Christ demands total and complete allegiance. He will not allow our "rights" to get in the way of His glory and the advancement of His Kingdom. Not even those most fundamental rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Does this mean Christians can never be happy? Never be safe? Never be free? Of course not. What it means is that even these things - as important as they are - cannot get in the way of the gospel. As Paul writes, "we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ." (1 Corinthians 9:12)

Ultimately, "rights" have to do with identity. Wherever we ground our identity, we will guard and protect those rights fiercely. Think about the culture wars that are currently raging and what they reveal about where so many find their identity and thus their rights as individuals. Gender. Sexuality. Race. Political affiliation. National citizenship. Economic status. Educational level. All of these things become part of our identity. Some we are born with. Some we achieve over the course of our lives. It doesn't matter. Christ calls us to lay all of them down. To willingly and joyfully surrender them for the greater privilege of becoming His disciple. Once our identity is grounded in Him, we realize all the rights we've been clinging to are rubbish compared to the magnificence of His amazing grace. This, in turn, gives us unbelievable freedom. I love how Paul puts it, "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not

being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings." (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

Friends, what rights are you holding onto? What privileges are you clinging to? What parts of your identity still need to be surrendered to Jesus? Let go. Open your hands. Open your heart and experience anew the freedom that comes only from the gospel.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 12-14

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November 29, 2022

The Body of Christ

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 12-14

I love the church. I love the people who make up the church. They come from a wide variety of different backgrounds and life experiences. They represent different cultures and ethnicities. They hold to different political and social positions. They are diverse in terms of age and economic status. They find themselves at different points along the spectrum of spiritual maturity. They wrestle with all sorts of sin issues. There's no other organization in the world quite like it and none of it would be possible without Jesus. Only Christ is strong enough to hold them together in a world that is increasingly divided and fractured along ideological lines.

Nothing is new under the sun. The Roman Empire was intentionally pluralistic. It was made up of wide variety of cultures and ethnicities and languages and religions. Depending on where one went, one would encounter a wide variety of social and political norms. The one thing that held the empire together was a ritual that was performed once a year. Once a year a person had to present themselves before the Roman authorities, place a pinch of incense into a flaming brazier, and acknowledge the divinity of the emperor. Most of the pagan religions had no problem with this practice. They simply added the emperor to their pantheon of gods and goddesses. For Jews and Christians however, this practice was blasphemy. They refused to engage it. The Jews were largely given an accommodation due to their long history of exclusive monotheism but the Christians - being so new - were persecuted as a seditious, dangerous cult.

This is the cultural context in which the Apostle Paul planted his churches. He intentionally went to the largest and most cosmopolitan cities in the empire. Cities that sat at the crossroads of major, important trade routes that would draw people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. Corinth was perhaps the greatest of these cities outside of Rome herself. The people who responded to the gospel in that city were as diverse as you could possibly get. They had very little in common with each other which created all sorts of issues that Paul had to address in his letters. (Most scholars believe Paul wrote at least four letters to this church.) They were a gifted group of people. They were a relatively wealthy church as well. And yet they were plagued by divisions. Their fellowship was rife with competition. Their besetting sin was pride and it was literally tearing them apart.

This is why Paul writes so passionately about the Body of Christ. He wants to give them an image that will pull them together. He wants them to understand that each of them plays an essential role in helping the Body remain healthy and strong. He points out how they are "crippling" themselves when they cut off a "hand" or a "foot" or tear out an "eye" or an "ear." He wants them to treasure their diversity. He wants them to see the variety of gifts God has given them as a strength not a weakness. Most of all, he wants them to understand that only the love of Christ can hold them together.

Some scholars suggest that the famous love chapter of Corinthians is an insert. It doesn't seem to fit in Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts. I think the opposite. I think it fits perfectly for it is love that binds us all together in perfect harmony. (Col. 3:14) Only the love of Christ "believes all things, bears all things, endures all things, hopes all things." Only the love of Christ "never fails." This was certainly true for the Corinthian Christians and it remains true for us today. The only hope we have as a church is to lean into the love of Christ together. If we try to organize our life together around anything else, we will fail. We will fall apart. The Body of Christ runs on the love of Christ. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 15-16

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November 30, 2022

The Gospel

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 15-16

Boil the Christian faith down and what do you get? A man hanging on a cross, buried in a tomb, rising from the grave three days later. This is the heart of our faith. Without it, we preach in vain. We pray in vain. We live in vain. Without the death and resurrection of Christ, we are fools. We would be better off to eat and drink and party and make the most out of life because death wins. Literally everything rests on this fundamental truth...Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

This is what sets Christianity apart from all other religions on the face of the earth. It's what makes us unique. It's what makes us different. It's what makes Christianity true. We preach a crucified Lord and a Risen Savior. No other faith tradition makes anything close to the same claim. Sure, we might share the same moral code. Their gods might have some of the same attributes as our God. Their worship might look strikingly similar in terms of music and prayer. They might be good people with great families who live wholesome lives. They might make positive contributions to our society. But if they do not believe in the literal, historical, bodily death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; then their preaching is in vain. Their faith is in vain. They are still enslaved to their sins. Their dead are eternally lost. All because they are found to be misrepresenting God by denying the glory of His one and only Son.

Paul is very clear. The physical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is THE essential cog in our faith. It is the key to unlocking saving faith. It is the lens through which we now see all of life. It is the cipher that cracks the code of the Bible. Christ has been raised as the firstfruits of the resurrection. He is the foretaste. The forerunner. The first to be raised so that He can go before us and prepare the way. His physical body was laid into the ground perishable, dishonored, and weak. It was raised imperishable, glorious, and in power. He is the first to be changed. The first to be transformed. The first to be raised. By His resurrection, we know death has lost. Sin has been defeated. The works of the evil one destroyed. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is nothing short of the total and complete victory of God!

And it is God's victory that makes us immovable. Steadfast. Always abounding in His work. It is God's victory that makes us watchful. Firm and strong in the faith. Persistent in love. It is his complete confidence in God's victory that gives Paul courage to face the stones at Lystra. The beatings and imprisonments. The shipwrecks and torments. Paul considers all of it loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. What about you, my friend? Do you share this same confidence in the death and resurrection of Jesus?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Corinthians 1-4

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December 1, 2022

Rejecting Self-Sufficiency

Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 1-4

For most of my life, my goal was self-sufficiency. I didn't want to have to depend on anyone for anything. When I left home at 18 to go to college, I promised myself I would never go back. Not because my home life was bad but because I felt this desperate need to be on my own. Independent. I've always had this personality streak. My mom tells a famous story about my first day at preschool. She drove me up to the school, unbuckled me, and gave me my backpack. She was hoping for a tender moment where I would hug her and tell her how much I would miss her and how much I needed to stay with her. Sadly, it was not to be. I simply turned around and walked into school. Didn't even look back to wave goodbye. My poor mother! Fast forward about twenty years. My wife and I are dating. There were moments when she really needed me but I had other plans. I refused to change them for her. Didn't even think twice about it. No wonder we were told by an older, wiser couple - both were mental health professionals - that in their professional opinion, we weren't good for each other. I was too independent. Too self-sufficient.

Perhaps that's why the words from the Apostle Paul hit home with me. "Such is the confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." (2 Corinthians 3:4-6) The Apostle Paul was a self-sufficient man. He had spent his entire life progressing ahead of his peers in Pharisaism. He was on track to be one of the major leaders of his sect of Judaism. He had studied at the feet of the greatest teachers. He was born with the privilege of Roman citizenship. He was a polyglot who could speak multiple languages and interact with different cultures. He was a brilliant, passionate, and deeply committed to his faith. But all of it was insufficient to prepare him for his calling as a "minister of the new covenant." Coming face to face with the Risen Christ reminded Paul of his deep inadequacies and insecurities. As faithful as he was to the "letter" of the Law, all he could produce was death. Only by surrendering to the Holy Spirit, could he produce life.

I too spent my entire life growing up trying to chase success. Whatever I put my hand to, I tended to succeed. I was an all-state athlete. Honor student. Eagle Scout. I sang solo's in the church choir and was the lead when we produced a version of Godspell. I was well on my way to self-sufficiency but then I met Jesus. And Jesus revealed my deep inadequacies and insecurities. He showed me that for all my effort to follow all the rules and achieve all the success, all I had produced at the end of the day was dust. Only by surrendering to Him would I ever find the significance I was looking for and longing for in my life. Thankfully, I said "yes" to Jesus that day and He made me a minister of a new covenant so that I might impart life to others. What about you? Are you still striving? Are you still waking up each day trying to win the rat race we call life? Or have you entrusted your life to Jesus? Will you let His Spirit in to give you the abundant life only He can deliver?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Corinthians 5-9

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December 2, 2022

The Hard Work of Reconciliation

Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 5-9

Reconciliation is a radical act in our day and age. We live in such a divided world. We are divided along social lines. Political lines. Racial/ethnic lines. Sexual lines. Economic lines. Educational lines. All of it taking on a religious fervor as each person seeks to defend their position over and against their perceived enemies. Differences of opinion devolve into personal animosity. Policy differences become litmus tests for morality. Ideological purity must be maintained at all costs lest one fall down the slippery slope to compromise. Social media throws gasoline on this dumpster fire on a daily basis. Cable "news" organizations fill their programming slots with partisan opinion shows designed to reinforce confirmation bias. It even filters down to the personal level in our day to day relationships. I cannot begin to count the number of times I've had someone tell me about a situation where their feelings were hurt. Rather than follow the gospel-call to forgive and reconcile, they began attacking the other person's character. Impugning motives. Words like "betrayal" and "wounded" and "abuse" get thrown around far too casually. All in an attempt to justify cutting a person out of their lives.

None of us are immune to these cultural pressures. None of us have clean hands when it comes to this issue. Reconciliation is hard, hard work. And it is impossible without Jesus Christ. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation." (2 Corinthians 5:17-19) The Apostle Paul lived in deeply pluralistic world. A world of great diversity. A world full of political, social, sexual, and religious intrigue. A world where different groups literally came to blows, often in violent and brutal ways. Into this world, Paul believes God has sent His church. His people. And they have been entrusted with a very special task. Reconciliation.

What is reconciliation according to Paul? It is God reconciling the world to Himself. It is God laying down His life for us while we were still sinners. It is God making peace with us while we were still at war with Him. It is God sacrificing Himself for His enemies...namely you and me. Reconciliation requires we do the same. It requires us to relinquish our need for vengeance. It requires us to not count a person's trespasses against them. It requires a conscious decision not to hold a person's past actions against them. Most of all, it requires us to "regard no one according to the flesh", meaning we no longer let a person's political, social, sexual, or racial/ethnic identity get in the way of a relationship. We love them as Christ loves them. Unconditionally. This doesn't mean we try to "erase" their uniqueness. This doesn't mean we try to "whitewash" or "homogenize" everyone. This doesn't mean we make them become like us. No, we love them as they are. We love them where they are. We love them for who they are. Image-bearers of God. Born with a dignity that, while broken utterly by sin, can never fully be lost.

I can already hear the protests in your heart. What about an abuser? What about the man who murdered my child? Raped my daughter? Stole my life savings in a Ponzi scheme? What about the corporate criminals at places like FTX or dictators who use chemical weapons on their own people? Evil is legion in our world, are you suggesting we meet such evil with reconciliation and love? How naive! Only a white, privileged, cisgender, heterosexual male would ever say such a thing! And perhaps that's partly true. I am fully aware of my cultural location. Fully aware I have never had to battle systematic oppression. Fully aware I have never suffered abuse. Fully aware I have never been the victim of a

violent crime. But I have sat with many who have. I have listened to their stories. Perpetrators and victims alike. I worked for two years in a maximum security prison. I know many murderers personally. I have seen their hate up close and personal. I have spent the last twenty years in ministry. Spent countless hours counseling with victims of abuse. I have seen their pain up close and personal. I have been overseas many times. Met survivors of genocide. Survivors of civil wars. Survivors of holocausts no one has ever heard of. I have seen life-threatening poverty up close and personal. I have stood at the mass graves. I have listened to the stories of trauma and tragedy. It is heartbreaking on a level I cannot comprehend.

But I have also seen the power of reconciliation. I have seen it in the Gacaca courts of Rwanda where perpetrators of genocide confess their crimes, are confronted by their victims, and the local community is able to move towards healing and restoration. I have seen it in the church plants of Ethiopia where former tribal enemies become brothers and sisters through the saving work of Jesus Christ. I have seen it in New Jersey State Prison where murderers received parole because the family of their victim was willing to forgive and reconcile. I saw it in a local church I served whose history included no record of African-American members though they were located in a neighborhood that was racially diverse. The courage of one young African-American man changed the hearts and minds of so many who had grown up with segregation. His Christ-like love overwhelmed their natural prejudice and they were set free. I have seen it in my counseling office as husbands and wives lay aside their “record of wrongs” and marriages are renewed. I have seen it in my own life as my heart is shaped and formed by the influence of godly mentors from all walks of life. An African refugee pastor who has forgiven those who persecuted and imprisoned him. A female Old Testament professor who has successfully battled misogyny with forgiveness and grace. A gay man who faithfully serves the LGBTQ community though they consider him a traitor for choosing the path of celibacy out of obedience to Christ. These are just a few of my heroes. Just a few of the men and women who are taking God’s message of reconciliation to the world. I pray for the courage to do the same.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Corinthians 10-13

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December 3, 2022

Areas of Influence

Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 10-13

I've recently been struck by Paul's words at the end of 2 Corinthians 10. He says, "But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you. For we are not overextending ourselves, as though we did not reach you. For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ. We do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others. But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged, so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's area of influence." I love Paul's passion and humility. He sees the whole world as his parish and yet recognizes that even he has limits. God is not just using him but a host of others - a great crowd of witnesses - to accomplish His great work. The work of the Kingdom is not driven by celebrity. It is never a one man or one woman show. Paul isn't interested in competing in areas where others have had gospel influence. He isn't interested in extending his brand. He has no desire to promote himself. He simply wants to go to those places where the gospel hasn't been preached and he knows it will take the entire Body of Christ to make that dream a reality.

Sadly, I see the opposite attitude at work in the American church today. Rather than ask ourselves if communities already have a gospel presence, we focus more on our brand. It could be a denominational brand. It could be a non-denominational brand. The rise of the multi-site church is a classic example of this phenomenon. The goal is to build the largest platform possible and it doesn't matter how many smaller churches are cannibalized along the way. We desperately need a reset. We have masked entrepreneurialism as "church planting" and it's literally killing the American church. We plant churches whose leaders have little if any accountability and they are falling in seemingly record numbers. Numerical growth is used to justify all kinds of pastoral abuse and neglect and it must break the heart of God. He must weep as He watches His children compete against each other rather than expand their areas of influence into regions where the gospel has never been heard.

Over the past several years, I've had a front row seat to this mess. I've been approached by large mega-churches asking me to come under their "brand" to reach the front range of Colorado. I've been told by Pentecostal churches that the Lord had anointed them - and their pastor - to bring revival to my church and my community. I've been hit up for money by church planters who are planting in communities that are saturated with gospel-centered churches more times than I can count. Through it all, I keep coming back to Paul's words above, particularly as Eugene Peterson translates them in his Message version of the Bible - "We're not barging in on the rightful work of others, interfering with their ministries, demanding a place in the sun with them. What we're hoping for is that as your lives grow in faith, you'll play a part within our expanding work. And we'll all still be within the limits God sets as we proclaim the Message in countries beyond Corinth. But we have no intention of moving in on what others have done and taking credit for it. "If you want to claim credit, claim it for God." What you say about yourself means nothing in God's work. It's what God says about you that makes the difference." (2 Cor. 10:15-18)

If only the American church could recapture a vision to truly reach the lost. To go to communities where there is no gospel presence. To go to the places of greatest need where the chances of "building a platform" for ourselves don't exist. If only we were gripped by the idea that no one has the right to hear the gospel twice while there remains some who have yet to hear it once. (Oswald Smith) Then we might see revival come. Then we might see the church become the light of the world as she was created and called to be.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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December 5, 2022

The Power of the Gospel

Readings for today: Acts 20:1-3, Romans 1-4

You may have seen the news out of Europe about the Dutch man who tried to change his legal age. Biologically, he is in his sixties but he "feels" like he's in his forties and his life is diminished because of the discrimination that happens the older one gets. You may have caught the news out of England about the man who believes passionately in "ethical veganism" and wants it to become legally protected as a religion so he can potentially force his former employer to give him his job back as well as change their investment practices so as not to violate his religious beliefs. You may have seen the opinion piece in the New York Times from the transgender woman who argues the medical ethical guildeline of "Do no harm" no longer should apply because no doctor should ever have the authority to determine what actually "harms" another person. "I also believe that surgery's only prerequisite should be a simple demonstration of want. Beyond this, no amount of pain, anticipated or continuing, justifies its withholding." (Andrea Long Chu, NYT, 11/24/2018) These may seem like isolated cases to you. Outliers we should dismiss. I disagree.

I believe they are the prime examples of God giving us over to the "lusts of our hearts...dishonorable passions...debased minds." Now please hear me. I am not being mean. I am not being judgmental. I am simply pointing out the reality of what happens when we turn away from God. We dis-integrate. Body, mind, heart, and soul are set in opposition to one another, resulting in skyrocketing rates of depression and suicide ideation. Dysphoria, once considered a mental illness, is now being celebrated and embraced. The Apostle Paul knew the tragic consequences of such thinking. It was celebrated in his own context as well. Human beings, created and designed to bring God glory and honor, turned from their sacred vocation and pursued their own pleasure. They did what was right in their own eyes. They forged their own path only to find it leading them over a cliff. The most heartbreaking part of reading the New York Times story mentioned above was Andrea's willingness, even desire, to embrace depression and suicide. She admits taking hormones and having surgery will actually take her deeper into depression but she sees no alternative. She has no hope.

This is why Paul's stirring words in Romans 1:16 are so important! "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." Make no mistake, Paul doesn't believe the gospel is simply a good idea. One philosophy among many. One path among many to get to God. No, he truly believes the gospel provides the only ANSWER to the problem of pain and suffering of this world. He truly believes the gospel provides the only HOPE we can possibly have for a better, richer, more integrated life. He truly believes the gospel alone has the power to save humanity from itself.

Now I know this idea is very unpopular in our culture today. To suggest Christianity is somehow superior in any way to any other religious or philosophical idea is considered arrogant and condescending. Exclusive and intolerant. But let me put it another way. Imagine you develop a successful treatment for cancer. Imagine your success rate is 100% at curing the disease. Sure, there are a lot of other treatments out there. Some more successful than others but yours is guaranteed. Would it not be right to promote it as the better, more superior option? Paul believes the gospel is the power of God for salvation. He believes it actually delivers on what it promises. Is he not right then to promote it as the superior cure to what ails humanity? Namely, sin? Is he not right to promote it above the Torah? Are we not right to promote it above Islam? Hinduism? Buddhism? If we truly believe Jesus is God then how can we not declare Him as superior in every way to Mohammed, Krishna, Buddha, even

Moses? Friends, this is exactly the truth that changed Paul's life on the road outside Damascus. When he realized Jesus had been raised from the dead, he knew He could be no ordinary prophet. Jesus must be God and therefore everything Jesus said or did must be true. And if everything Jesus said or did must be true then we must believe Him. And if we believe Him then we will surrender our lives to Him. And if we surrender our lives to Him then we will be submit all our thoughts, feelings, and actions to His Lordship. And if we submit to His Lordship, we will find ourselves a regenerated and re-integrated people living not for ourselves but for the honor and glory of God. This is the power of the gospel.

Readings for tomorrow: Romans 5-8

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December 6, 2022

A Story of Life and Death

Readings for today: Romans 5-8

The fundamental story of the Bible is a story of life and death. It's a story of how death first entered the world. Once upon a time, there was a man named Adam. Adam lived in a garden full of perfection and beauty. He enjoyed perfect communion with His Creator. His job was to care for all His Creator had made. Alongside Adam, there was also a woman. Her name was Eve. Together they labored for who knows how long, living in perfect harmony with God, with each other, and with the world God had made. God had entrusted His world into their hands. Given them all the authority and responsibility for it. They were His image-bearers. His high priests. His representatives. But they soon grew tired of playing this role. They aspired to something more. A role they were not designed for. And when they grasped for that role, they fell. We call that fall "sin." It was the breaking of God's commands. More importantly, it was the betrayal of a relationship. The cost of this betrayal was high. They were exiled from their perfect garden. Their perfect communion with God was broken. The world that had once thrived under the blessing of their careful stewardship now suffered under the tyranny of their selfishness and greed. But still they were responsible. God never revoked their dominion. Instead, He held them accountable. He judged them with righteousness and justice. Death was the punishment for their sin. And so this huge abyss opened up, separating us from God. And this abyss dominated the landscape from Adam to Moses, from Moses to David, from David to the Babylonian Exile, from the Babylonian Exile to the rebuilding of the Temple, from the rebuilding of the Temple to John the Baptist.

Then something miraculous took place. The same God who made Adam from the dust of the earth and breathed His own Spirit into Adam's lungs conceived a child in a virgin's womb though the power of the Holy Spirit. Unlike Adam, Jesus was not born into a perfect world. He was born into a world corrupted and broken and torn apart by violence and suffering and pain. The wages of sin on full display. Death stalking around every corner. And yet Jesus enjoyed perfect communion with His Heavenly Father. In Him was life not death and that life was the light of all humankind. Through His birth, life, death, and resurrection, Jesus brings life into the world and overthrows the reign of death. He bridges the abyss that separated us from God. Death may have had the upper hand for centuries but life - God's life - overwhelms it in the end. And those who place their faith in Jesus Christ receive this incredible gift. The gift of eternal life itself. The gift of a life beyond death. A life that overcomes death. A life that will transcend death.

Here's the bottom line: Just as death entered the world through Adam's sin so life enters the world through Jesus' righteousness. Just as one person chose to elevate himself to a place he didn't belong and so brought the whole world down around him so another person chose to humble Himself to a place He didn't belong and so lifted the whole world up. Just as one man said "No" to God and put humanity herself at risk so another man said "Yes" to God and saved humanity from her sin. And all that is now asked of humanity is faith. Trust. Belief. Hope. God has taken the broken pieces of this world and put them back together again through Jesus Christ,

Readings for tomorrow: Romans 9-12

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December 7, 2022

The Radical Inclusivity of God

Readings for today: Romans 9-12

So many people read these passages from Romans and think about the people God is seemingly excluding. They question the justice of God's election. How could God elect some to glory and not others? How could He treat some people with honor and some with dishonor? How could God love some - like Jacob - and hate others - like Esau? How could God play favorites with humanity? While these questions are real and honest and authentic, they miss the point Paul is trying to make.

First and foremost, we have to hear Paul's heart. "You need to know that I carry with me at all times a huge sorrow. It's an enormous pain deep within me, and I'm never free of it. I'm not exaggerating—Christ and the Holy Spirit are my witnesses. It's the Israelites. . . If there were any way I could be cursed by the Messiah so they could be blessed by him, I'd do it in a minute. They're my family. I grew up with them. They had everything going for them—family, glory, covenants, revelation, worship, promises, to say nothing of being the race that produced the Messiah, the Christ, who is God over everything, always." (Romans 9:1-5 MSG) Paul cannot fathom why so many of his fellow Jews refuse to believe. He cannot understand why they can't see what he sees. How did they miss their Messiah? Their entire way of life was supposed to prepare them for when He appeared and yet when He appeared, they killed Him rather than worshipped Him. And even now, after Jesus has been raised from the dead in power and glory, they still will not accept the good news of the gospel. It cuts him like a knife. He'd rather the Lord curse him if it would help save them.

Second, we need to hear Paul's argument. We need to take his line of thinking seriously. Paul's newfound faith in Jesus Christ is not a departure from his Judaism but rather the fulfillment of it. In true rabbinic style, Paul engages in midrash. Midrash is oral tradition that engages and exegetes the Scriptural text and seeks to apply it within a particular cultural context. Paul is clear. The Word of God has not failed. In fact, the opposite is true. Abraham's family was built on a promise not genetics. It was defined by "Isaac" and not "Ishmael." His descendants become his children by faith and not by the flesh. The same was true for Jacob and Esau, God making it clear His purposes are not random but intentional. Now some may complain this makes God unfair but they don't see the bigger picture of what God is doing. They don't see the grander plan God has in store. They are missing the forest for the trees. God's goal, according to the prophet Hosea, has always been to take nobodies and make them somebodies. To take the unloved and call them beloved. This is why so many Gentiles are coming to faith! Though they didn't seek God, He sought them. Though they didn't know God, He knew them. Though they didn't love God, He loved them. And it's not like God somehow forgot Israel along the way. Not at all! Day after day, Paul says at the end of Romans 10, God opened His arms to His people only to have them reject Him over and over again. Still that didn't stop God!

Paul's final point is perhaps His most important. God is so good and so glorious that He will use even the resistance of His people for His salvific purposes. God will make sure their hardness of heart is temporary. He will use their hardness of heart to open a door to the Gentiles. The goal here is to fill the house of God with all whom He loves. Jew and Gentile. Slave and free. Male and female. All will become one in Christ Jesus and "Israel" will finally be complete. Paul is so blown away by this reality that he breaks out in praise. "Have you ever come on anything quite like this extravagant generosity of God, this deep, deep wisdom? It's way over our heads. We'll never figure it out. Is there anyone around who can explain God? Anyone smart enough to tell him what to do? Anyone who has done him such a huge favor that God has to ask his advice? Everything comes from him; Everything happens through him; Everything ends up in him. Always glory! Always praise!" (Romans 11:33-36 MSG)

Readings for tomorrow: Romans 13-16

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December 8, 2022

A Heavenly Kingdom

Readings for today: Romans 13-16

Imagine you are the Apostle Paul. Writing to a group of Christians living in Rome in the late 50's AD. The Roman Empire has suffered tremendously since the reign of Augustus Caesar. Successor after successor has tried and failed to live up to his legacy. Political opposition is met with violence. The Praetorian Guard (think Secret Service of the first century) assassinates the very emperors they swear to protect. Tax rates rise and fall depending on public opinion polls. The borders of the empire are starting to crumble. The government is unstable and rulers are often certifiably insane. Nero rises to power. The initial signs are good. He seems to care about the poor. He often takes the side of the little guy. It looks like he's being advised well by Seneca. By all accounts, things are looking up. Then he murders his stepbrother. Murders his mother. Murders rival senators who oppose him. He initiates building projects that exhaust the treasury and overtax the populace. Rumors spread about the Great Fire that burned Rome for a week in July of 64 AD. Nero blames the Christians. He starts systematically persecuting them. He imprisons them. He throws them to the lions. He burns them alive in his gardens. It's a rough time.

Now imagine receiving this letter from Paul and reading these words, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed." (Romans 13:1-7) How would you respond? What thoughts would go through your mind if you were living in Rome under Nero watching the country descend into chaos? How would you feel about the "governing authorities" when you see them carrying your friends off to be tortured and executed for their faith? How likely would you be to submit to them? Continue to be a model citizen? Pay your taxes? Honor the emperor? Is Paul serious? Does he not understand who's in power here? Is he ignorant of what's actually happening on the streets of Rome?

Clearly, Paul understands. He will be imprisoned in Rome by 60AD himself, awaiting his eventual torture and execution. He has been flogged. Stoned. Beaten. Left for dead. He has been falsely accused. Falsely imprisoned. He knows what it's like to suffer and yet, throughout his own life, he seemed to model the very words he just wrote to his Roman friends. Jesus did as well. Jesus submitted himself to the governing authorities of this world. Herod. Pilate. The Sanhedrin. All driven by a lust for power. All corrupt to the core. And yet Jesus refused to call down legions of angels to fight at his side. He allowed his farse of a trial to stand. He refused to advocate for Himself before Pilate. He ignored Herod when he asked for a sign. Why? Jesus and Paul both understood they belonged to a Kingdom not of this world. They were citizens of a heavenly empire that transcended any earthly one. Their sole allegiance was to the God of the universe who had given all authority in heaven and earth to Jesus so there was no need to fight the power. No need to lead a rebellion. Because at best you would be replacing one sinful system with another.

At the same time, Paul is not advocating apathy. He is not calling for Christians to become doormats for the empire. What he calls for is a very proactive way of living that sets an example before culture and society of humble godliness even in the face of persecution. We are never to surrender the moral high ground. Never to surrender our deeply held Kingdom values. Never to give up Jesus for the sake of political expediency and gain. Why? First and foremost, we recognize all authority comes from God. It serves His purposes. God is able to bend both good and evil intentions to His will. God is able to use even the most corrupt to accomplish His plan. No matter what happens. No matter who gets elected President. No matter who serves in Congress. No matter who gets confirmed to the Supreme Court. All of them serve at God's pleasure. He takes them down just as easily as He raises them up. All of them rule under His sovereign authority and command.

Second, Paul understands the power of a godly witness. Even corrupt rulers cannot deny the power of the gospel. This was the genius behind the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights struggle. He believed by engaging in peaceful, non-violent protest of unjust laws that African-Americans and their allies would hold a mirror up to the corrupt soul of segregation. They believed their godly example would expose the evil legacy of slavery. They believed their political "enemies" needed salvation not destruction and this set them apart. The same was true for Nelson Mandela in South Africa. The same was true for Pope John Paul II when he led the Solidarity movement against communism in Poland. The same was true for Ghandi - though not a Christian, he based his resistance on the example of Christ - in India. In each and every case, these leaders led movements that transformed the course of nations and they were almost entirely based on the "good conduct" of their followers. "Do what is good and you will receive (the ruler's) approval, for he is God's servant for your good." (Romans 13:3) This is the power of a godly witness.

Finally, Paul elevates the cardinal virtue of humility. Submission. Subjection. Offering respect and honor to the office even if the person in the office is corrupt. Paul believes we should model our lives after Jesus. As he will write to his Philippians friends, Jesus is by nature God. But Jesus did not hold onto His equality with God. He relinquished it. He gave it up. He emptied Himself of all His divine rights and riches in order to become a human being. And not just any human being but a servant. A slave. But even then Jesus wasn't content. He took it one step further. Humbling Himself to death. The most humiliating death possible. Death on a cross. Paul sought to pattern his own life after Jesus and he calls all Christians to do the same. "Follow me as I seek to follow Christ." (1 Corinthians 11:1) Just as Christ rendered to Caesar what was Caesar's, Paul now calls on Christians in Rome to pay their taxes. Keep honest financial records. Respect the authorities. Honor the emperor. For in so doing, we honor Christ.

Of all the things we've read this year, this may be the most difficult passage for us to accept. Hate is the political currency of our day. Rage. Anger. Condemnation. Character assassination is our national pastime. We rejoice when our enemies fall. We defend our allies at all costs. We will sacrifice everything - including our Kingdom values - on the altar of political power and gain. Scorched-earth resistance is now the norm when the opposing party is in power and it is crippling our nation. And this is true for both Republicans and Democrats. Sadly, Christians seem no different than their non-Christian neighbors in this respect. In fact, we often seem to be out front leading the way and our blatant hypocrisy is on public display. Jesus weeps, friends. He weeps to see us so easily fall prey to the lust for power, influence, and control. He weeps to see us so easily sacrifice our witness and for so little. He weeps as He watches His people - citizens of the Kingdom of God - so easily and readily give up the moral high ground.

Thankfully, the truth of God remains. Though the grass withers and the flower fades, the Word of God is eternal. He is still on His throne. He still reigns from on high. He still sits at the right hand of the Father. He will bend even this time to His will. He will use even the corrupt politics of our day and age to accomplish His plan. There is nothing any human being can do that will thwart His purposes. So submit to the governing authorities, friends. Live godly lives before them. Witness to them by working for justice and righteousness. Pray without ceasing for the Spirit's work in their hearts. Give them the respect and honor due them by virtue of the office they hold.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 20:4-38, 21:1-23:35

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December 9, 2022

Sent

Readings for today: Acts 20:4-38, 21:1-23:35

What does total surrender to Christ look like? It looks like the Apostle Paul. Paul leaves his home. His friendships. His business. His ministry all behind in order to suffer for Christ. He was compelled by the Holy Spirit to return to Jerusalem where he knew he would be put in chains. Prophecy after prophecy had been made. Warning after warning had been given. There was no more dangerous place for Paul to to and yet he went. Not out of pride or arrogance but out of obedience to His Lord. It was Jesus who sent him to testify in Jerusalem and it would be Jesus who would send him to testify in Rome. From the heart of Judaism to the heart of the empire. Paul was Jesus' chosen instrument to declare the good news of the gospel in front of kings and rulers and authorities. Though it would eventually cost him his life, Paul considered it a privilege to serve.

I have met many "Apostle Paul's" in my life. Men and women who sacrifice everything for the sake of the gospel. They leave their homes. Their families. Their friendships. Their businesses. And they go to faraway places. Towns and villages who have never heard the name of Jesus. They place themselves in danger. They endure persecution. Many of them will bear the scars for the rest of their lives. Some of them even lose their lives. Why do they do it? They feel compelled by the Holy Spirit. Constrained by His will to go to the places He shows them in order to share Christ with those who are lost. They do not act of pride or arrogance. They do not trust in their own resources or strength. They are not naive or ignorant. They go with the understanding that they may not return. But they cannot help themselves. It is Jesus who commands them. It is Jesus who sends them. It is Jesus who calls them into the harvest field. They are Jesus' chosen instruments to make His gospel known among a people who have never heard. They preach in places that do not show up on any map. They cross borders into places where the gospel has never gone. They confront principalities and powers we cannot fathom, armed only with the gospel. And though it costs them their health. Their wealth. Their family. Sometimes their lives. They consider it a privilege and honor to serve.

All of us are called by Jesus. All of us are sent by Jesus. All of us have a field to harvest for our Lord. Sadly, too many of us never show up for work. Our fields are wild and overgrown. They have gone untended for far too many years. Sure, we mean well. We think we'll get to it one day. Once we're financially secure. Once our kids are grown. Once we get married and settle down. Or we work the edges of of the field. Close to the gate. In the places where it's safest. After all, we wouldn't want to place ourselves at risk, right? God wants us to be safe, right? He would never call us to sacrifice our comfort or lifestyle or livelihood or family or friendships for the sake of His mission, right? Isn't the dangerous work reserved for the truly holy? The super Christians? Surely that's not me. Surely that's not what Jesus wants me to do.

The Word of God is clear. It leaves us very little wiggle room. All that we have been given. All that we've earned over the course of our lives. All our success. All our wealth. All our possessions. All our relationships. All our friendships. Everything in our lives must be surrendered and laid at the feet of our Lord. It has come from His hands and must be returned to Him. This is the price of following Jesus. We relinquish it all. We surrender it all. We let go of it all and walk with open hands and open hearts before Him. Our first call is to serve Jesus. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else is allowed to get in the way. Not our families. Not our careers. Not our friendships. Not our possessions. Not our retirement. Not our fears. Not our failures. Not our anxieties. Not our worries. Not our doubts. Not our questions. Nothing. Jesus is Lord. When He calls me, I will answer. Where He sends me, I will go. I am Jesus' chosen instrument to make His will known in my community and to the ends of the earth. And it is a privilege and honor to serve.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 24-26

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December 10, 2022

The Resurrection Changes Everything

Readings for today: Acts 24-26

“It is with respect to the resurrection from the dead that I am on trial before you this day.” (Acts 24:21b)

Everything for Paul hinges on the resurrection. When he met the Risen Christ outside of Damascus, a door opened in his heart that could never be closed. He was transformed. Suddenly all his zeal and passion for the Law was re-focused as he realized everything the prophets foretold had come true in Christ. His hope as a Pharisee for the eventual resurrection of the dead had actually taken place in his lifetime. Jesus was the firstfruits. He was the forerunner. He was the Messiah whom God had sent. And with this knowledge, all the tumblers fall into place. Jesus is the key that makes sense of the Law and Prophets. Jesus is the filter now through which all of Scripture should be read and understood. The Risen Christ brings new life and new meaning to everything Paul had learned over the course of his lifetime. And with this knowledge Paul is transformed from a violent, raging Pharisee intent on destroying Christianity to its foremost evangelist, pastor, and theologian.

Of course, wrapping your life around the resurrection will not make you popular. Paul found himself at odds with the Romans who believed he was nuts. Paul found himself at odds with his former friends and colleagues in Judaism who tried to have him killed. Paul even found himself at odds - as we have already seen - with some of his fellow Christians who could not grasp the depths of his message of unconditional love and grace. Living the resurrection life will certainly make you strange. Weird. Odd. Because your values and priorities and thoughts and attitudes and actions are shaped by another Kingdom. A Kingdom not of this world. Ruled by a King who is not of this world. Submitting your life to Him means living an “other-worldly” life. A life not ruled by fear. A life not centered around self. A life untangled and unencumbered by the cares and worries of this world.

Can you imagine living a life without fear? That’s the life Jesus offers. The resurrection life. Resurrection places us beyond the fears of this world. No longer do we fear death. No longer do we fear danger. No longer do we fear hunger or nakedness or prison or sickness. No longer do we fear the loss of possessions, reputation, position and privilege. No longer do we fear failure or pain or suffering. These “fears” are what the world uses to keep us in line. Squeeze us into its mold. Shape us into its corrupt image. But the resurrection sets us free from all of that! Now we are transformed as our hearts and minds are renewed by the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit that raised Christ Jesus from the dead now lives in us and is at work through us! This is what Paul understood. This is what Peter understood. This is what millions of Christians have understood throughout history and it is why the Kingdom of God continues to move with power on the earth.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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December 12, 2022

Evangelism and Mission

Readings for today: Acts 27-28

A few years ago, a young missionary named John Chau was killed as he tried to reach an unreached people group with the gospel. His death kicked over a hornet's nest of controversy. Some saw him as yet another martyr to the cause of Christ on par with the Jim Elliott's of the past. Others saw him as yet another example of colonial Christianity seeking to impose his views on a tribe who clearly didn't want him on their island. The inhabitants of North Sentinel killed John Chau as he attempted to befriend them, bring them gifts, and, most of all, share Christ. Why the controversy? First and foremost, we live in a culture where evangelism is cast in a negative light. The idea that one person's views are superior in any way to another's is anathema. The Sentinelese had a right to be left alone. Their religious views are no one else's business. Christian missionaries should stay out. Second, we live in a culture where "Christian missions" have too often been used as a cover for Western European colonial expansion. The evidence is legion in Africa, Latin America, and other places around the globe. Western powers using the gospel as a pretext to overthrow governments, manipulate economies, and enslave entire people groups. Third, too many missionaries are naive in their approach. They don't take seriously the potential of introducing life-threatening disease to the local population. They don't take the time to understand the language or learn the culture or use intermediaries who are culturally closer to the unreached group to help make first contact.

By all accounts, John Chau truly made an effort to overcome these barriers and address these concerns. He spent a great deal of time in training. He trained his body. Trained his mind. Trained his spirit to endure the isolation he would experience should he make successful contact. He got the proper immunizations and quarantined himself to protect the Sentinelese from any potential disease. He studied their culture. Studied what was known of their language. He made multiple trips to the region to familiarize himself with the area. He made enough local contacts to provide transport. He clearly was not an agent of some foreign government seeking to extend their influence. Once the dust settled, the picture that emerged was that of an earnest, sincere believer in Christ who clearly felt called to reach one of the most isolated tribes left in the world with the gospel. Time will tell if his death will bear any fruit.

What does this have to do with today's Bible reading? I imagine Paul faced similar challenges in his own journey to Rome. I think about his encounter with the indigenous people on Malta. Having been shipwrecked in a storm, Paul escapes with his life along with the other sailors and soldiers who were aboard. They make their way to the beach where they were greeted with kindness by the locals. A fire was kindled. Food was probably brought. Paul even gets bit by a poisonous snake and survives! Eventually, they are taken to the leader whose father was dying of disease. Paul heals him. Word gets out. The people bring all their sick to Paul to be cured and this gave Paul an opportunity - though the passage doesn't make this explicit - to preach the gospel.

I imagine the same people who criticize John Chau would have criticized Paul as well. The only difference is enough time has past to see the fruits of Paul's labor. His efforts clearly succeeded. The seeds of the gospel he planted bore fruit. An empire was converted. The world was changed. But now Paul's come to the end. The race has been run. The cup emptied. He will be executed in Rome. The latest in a long line of first century martyrs who gave their lives for the cause of Christ.

What can we learn from the example of Paul? Or the modern day example of John Chau? First, we must have a passion to reach the lost at all costs. There is an urgency to our mission because eternity is literally on the line. Christ Himself commanded us to make disciples of all nations. He told us we would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth. This commission has never been revoked so we must be obey. Second, we must be willing to sacrifice comfort, safety, reputation, and resources if we are to accomplish this mission. Evangelism will not make us popular. Many will reject what we have to say. They will criticize us and call us names. They may accuse us of promoting white supremacy, neo-colonialism, etc. But we must fear God more than man. Finally, we have to be wise. We cannot confuse the mission with the methods. We cannot be so wed to a certain way of doing things that we make it more important than the mission itself. We must be culturally sensitive and aware. We must be willing to relinquish power and authority to indigenous leadership. We must be humble in our approach and not pretend we have all the answers. We must study the culture we are trying to reach diligently and honor as much as we can. We must openly acknowledge when we make mistakes and ask for forgiveness.

The 29th chapter of Acts is being written even as we speak…what stories will be told about your mission work?

Readings for tomorrow: Philippians 1-4

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December 13, 2022

Pressing On

Readings for today: Philippians 1-4

"I press on to make (the righteousness that comes by faith) my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." - Phil. 3:12

Years ago, some Mormon missionaries happened to come to my door. They wanted to talk about faith which I happily obliged. I let them know right up front that I was a Christian. I let them know I was headed into ministry. I wanted to make sure I didn't waste their time. They told me they still wanted to talk so we sat down and began to compare notes on the differences between Christianity and Mormonism. We talked about what happens after we die. We talked about the Person of Jesus Christ. We talked about forgiveness of sin. Most of all, we talked about grace. I never will forget how they described it. "Grace", they said, "is what God gives you after you've done all you can live a good life. It's what closes the gap between us and God after we've made every effort to obey His commands." "That right there is the difference between our faiths", I replied. "Grace for the Christian covers it all. We can do nothing to get any closer to God or move any farther away. God's grace is what covers our lives from beginning to end and out of gratitude for God's grace, we seek to obey Him."

So many Christians today fall into one of two traps. Either they fall into the "works" trap, like my Mormon friends, thinking they can somehow earn their way to God or they fall into the "cheap grace" trap thinking nothing they do matters so why even try. The Apostle Paul shows us the better way. We "press on" towards righteousness, meaning we work as hard as we can to obey Christ and serve Christ and honor Christ with our lives. We take every thought captive to Christ. We run every feeling through the grid of our love for Christ. We evaluate every decision and every action through the lens of Christ. All that we say or do or feel or think must be submitted to His Lordship. At the same time, we acknowledge that the only reason we are able to "press on" is because Christ has already made us His own. Christ has already performed the work of righteousness for us. Christ has already done all that is necessary to fulfill the law of God. Therefore, our "pressing on" is not an attempt to win God's already won favor but an act of gratitude for what He has already done on our behalf. We also recognize to not "press on" is to make a mockery of Christ's sacrifice and we never want to cheapen His grace.

I love how the great Russian novelist and Christian believer, Leo Tolstoy, once described the Christian life. He wrote, "If I know the way home and am walking along it drunkenly, is it any less the right way because I am staggering from side to side?" In my experience, most Christians (including myself) seem to stagger from the side of works to the side of cheap grace and vice versa. Thankfully, it is Christ who keeps us on the road! It is Christ who keeps us on the way! It is Christ who promises to bring us home!

Readings for tomorrow: Philemon 1, Colossians 1-4

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December 14, 2022

Put on Christ

Readings for today: Philemon 1, Colossians 1-4

We got our first winter blast in Colorado yesterday. As I put on my coat to go to work, I thought about this passage from Colossians 3. One of my favorites. “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (Colossians 3:12-17) We do not accidentally become like Jesus. We don’t just stumble into more faithful discipleship. Growing in Christ-likeness is not a product of random chance or a roll of the dice. It’s an intentional effort every day to put on Christ. To put on the same qualities and characteristics that mark Christ. To put on the same attitude that is in Christ. To put on and seek out the mind of Christ.

Jesus isn’t hard to find. He’s actually not hard to follow. He’s not confusing or unclear about His expectations. He even promises to send His Spirit to lead us into all truth, produce good fruit in our lives, and complete the work He’s begun in us. All we have to do is surrender. All we have to do is empty ourselves of “self.” All we have to do is “put off” the old self and embrace the new self, the new identity, Jesus promises to give those He loves. I love how Paul starts with an affirmation. We are God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved…This is the fundamental reality of our existence as believers in Christ. This is how God sees us. Before we say or do or think or feel anything at all, we are already chosen, holy, and beloved. This is the foundation of our identity. As such, we “put on” the qualities and characteristics that mark such people. Compassion. Kindness. Humility. Meekness. Patience. Forgiveness. Grace. Love. Putting on these things every day begins to change us. As we practice these things, we actually become a different kind of people. And as we become a different kind of people, the peace of Christ begins to rule in our hearts. We live from a place of deep gratitude and thankfulness. The Word of Christ dwells in us richly and we are able to encourage others along the way. Finally, whatever we do or say becomes an act of devotion to our Lord and Savior.

It’s a beautiful picture of discipleship. And, again, it doesn’t happen by accident. It’s a long obedience in the same direction. It’s a lifetime of of daily devotion to Jesus. It’s an intentional decision day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year to “put on” Christ. We put on Christ when we don’t feel like it. We put on Christ in the midst of our doubts and fears and anxieties. We put on Christ as we struggle and suffer and experience heartbreak and pain. We put on Christ when we fail and fall short. We put on Christ consistently, constantly, regularly, persistently and He transforms us from the inside out. This is how the Christian life works and thankfully, it rests not on our ability to make it happen but on God who is faithful to use all things - the good, bad and ugly of our lives - for our good.

Readings for tomorrow: Ephesians 1-4

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December 15, 2022

So Many Promises…

Readings for today: Ephesians 1-4

Blessed. Chosen. Predestined in love. Adopted. Redeemed. Forgiven. Heirs of grace. Sealed by the Holy Spirit. Saved to serve as the praise of God's glory. These are just some of the promises listed in the first chapter of the Book of Ephesians. In the Greek, it's one long run-on sentence. Paul essentially tosses all the rules of grammar out the window as he seeks to express the sheer immensity of what God has done. His words literally trip all over themselves as he rushes to explain the riches of God's grace towards us. It's a chapter to read slowly, savoring each word. It's a chapter to read reflectively, thinking through the meaning of each phrase. It's a chapter to marinate in especially if you are struggling with doubts and questions about your faith.

Paul wants his Ephesian friends to know they are the object of God's eternal love. Way back before time began, God hatched a plan to save them. Way back before creation came into being, God was already in love with the creature He made in His own image. He had already purposed us to be the object of His amazing grace. He had already chosen us to be the recipients of His divine favor and blessing. He had already made a decision to adopt us into His own family. It's truly mind-blowing when you stop and think about it.

Not only did God set His heart on us, He came to save us. He sent His only Son to die for us. He poured out His Spirit to seal us for the day of salvation. He is at work inside us bringing to completion the good work He's begun. He's preparing us to live with Him for all eternity. He's getting us ready for the day when the old heavens and old earth pass away and the new heavens and new earth spring into being. When the veil of this world is pulled back and we finally see His glory and the glory of His Kingdom descend out of heaven itself. On that day, we shall receive the reward He has stored up for us. On that day, we shall receive the inheritance He has prepared for us. On that day, all hurts will be healed and all tears will be wiped away and evil will cease to exist.

Christians are called to live in such a way as to give the world a foretaste of that heavenly reality. As Paul says here in Ephesians 1:12, "We who were the first to hope in Christ are to live to the praise of His glory." We are to give the world a glimpse of heaven in the way we live and the way we love and the way we serve.

Readings for tomorrow: Ephesians 5-6, Titus 1-3

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December 16, 2022

Walk in the Light

Readings for today: Ephesians 5-6, Titus 1-3

One of the things I've been asked to do over the years is intervene in churches struggling with conflict. It could be a conflict between the pastor and the board. It could be conflict over how to handle the moral failing of a leader. It could be conflict over vision and values. It could be conflict resulting from years of dysfunctional behavior. Whatever the roots of the conflict may be, the symptoms are almost always the same. Rampant distrust resulting in an inability to listen to each other. Lots of triangulation, gossip, and slander. Half-truths and sometimes outright lies. An overwhelming need to "protect" the organization or the abusive leader through NDA's, gag orders, etc. Clandestine meetings in the parking lot after board meetings formally finish. Hard hearts that are unwilling to forgive and reconcile. A trail of victims whose concerns were ignored or dismissed. And most of it happens in the dark. Most of it is kept out of the light for fear of legal, professional, or personal exposure.

In our reading for today, the Apostle Paul encourages us to "walk as children of light…and take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness." (Eph. 1:8, 11) He tells us that the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true while the fruit of darkness brings one under the judgment of God. He challenges us to seek what is "pleasing to the Lord" rather than compromise our convictions by doing what is expedient to limit our exposure. He reminds us that once we walked in darkness. Once we walked in ignorance. Once we had no inheritance in the Kingdom of God because we were enslaved to sin. But now we are the "light of the Lord." Now we serve as God's representatives in the world and our lives should be a reflection of His light and love and glory.

I know so many who are walking in darkness. They do shameful things in secret that they hide from those they love. They are double-minded, trying to keep a foot in God's world while maintaining a foothold in this world. They want it both ways. I know so many churches who are walking in darkness. They make shameful decisions in secret that they hide from their congregation. They refuse to come clean out of a desire to keep everyone "safe" or maintain the "peace." They are double-minded, paying lip service to God while managing their affairs according to the ways of this world. They want it both ways. I know so many pastors who are walking in darkness. They do shameful things in secret that they hide beneath their public persona. They are double-minded, wanting the blessings of both heaven AND earth. They want it both ways.

God calls us to a narrow way. God calls us to a higher way. God calls us to His way. There is no other path by which we may be saved. We must be imitators of God in all we say and do. We must walk in love and light and reject the works of darkness utterly and completely. We must offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. We must seek each day to discern what is pleasing to the Lord and then do it. This is what it means for us to awake from our slumber and rise from the dead.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Timothy 1-6

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December 17, 2022

Keep the Main Thing, the Main Thing

Readings for today: 1 Timothy 1-6

Imagine you're Timothy. A young man who's been entrusted by Paul with the church in Ephesus. Ephesus is at the zenith of its power and influence. Made capital of the region by Caesar Augustus, it is a center for learning and commerce. It is home to one of the seven ancient wonders of the world. The Temple of Artemis draws thousands of pilgrims from all over the region. They came to worship. They came to trade. They came to make deposits at the Temple which served as the largest bank in the area as well. The cult of Artemis created great wealth. An entire economy had grown up around the worship of their deity. The priestesses exercised great political and social influence. Your mentor Paul started a riot here when he preached the gospel and the church he left behind was facing some significant challenges.

Whenever the gospel penetrates a new region, one of the real dangers that pops up almost immediately is syncretism. The merging of older, pagan religious beliefs with the truth of the Christian faith. Some of it is brought on by the missionaries themselves as they try to translate the gospel into the local language and culture. Some of it is brought by the new believers as they struggle to leave the old ways behind. What often ends up emerging is a faith that is sub-Christian or pseudo-Christian and this is exactly what Paul is warning Timothy about as he begins his letter. "As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith...Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions." (1 Timothy 1:3-4, 6-7)

Why is this so important? First and foremost, eternity is on the line. The primary message of the gospel is "that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..." (1 Timothy 1:15) Nothing should be allowed to get in the way of Jesus and those He came to save. Not the myths of the Ephesians nor the Law of the Jews. Second, what we believe shapes how we live. Throughout this letter, Paul will offer Timothy advice on a variety of subjects. Prayer. Leadership. Spiritual discipline. Teaching. Mentoring. Money. All of these are very practical, down to earth realities in the church Timothy serves. All of these probably caused Timothy a rash of headaches from time to time. Most of the conflict in the church even today revolves around many of these issues. And Timothy is young, as Paul points out. He is green. He probably doesn't have a ton of experience to fall back on as he looks to lead his congregation. So Paul encourages him to fall back on his faith. On his call to be a pastor. One that was confirmed by the council of elders when they laid hands on him. Timothy is not to let himself get bogged down but instead is to pursue "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses." (1 Timothy 6:11-12)

These words are as much for us as they are for Timothy. Unity in the essentials. Liberty in the non-essentials. Charity for all. The reality is it is just as easy for us to get bogged down. We read a letter like this and we focus on non-essential questions like who gets to serve and in what role or what people should wear to worship or the patriarchal/misogynistic nature of 1st century culture. We get so hung up on making sure the finer points of our theology align that we forget the major point Paul is making. "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." (1 Timothy 1:5) Get this part right and the rest has a way of taking care of itself.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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December 19, 2022

Following the Example of Christ

Readings for today: 1 Peter 1-5

"To this you have been called…" What thoughts follow this phrase in your mind? A life of blessing? A life of comfort and relative ease? A life of success and achievement? A strong and intimate marriage? Deep relationships with family and friends? I think these are the things I most naturally gravitate towards when I read a phrase like this from Scripture. It's why reading verses in context are so critically important.

"To this you have been called…" The Apostle Peter is not talking about a life of blessing and comfort and relative ease. He is not talking about achieving personal and professional success. He is not talking about marriage and family and friendships. He is talking about suffering. He is talking about following the example of Christ who suffered for us. He is talking about walking in His footsteps. Following His narrow way. Intentionally patterning our lives after His life. Jesus committed no sin nor was deceit found in His mouth. Though we are unable to remain sinless, nevertheless we are called to be holy even as He is holy. Jesus was reviled and beaten and persecuted yet refused to return evil for evil. Refused to threaten or take revenge. He simply entrusted Himself into His Father's hands. If we are serious about our faith, it is highly likely we too will be reviled. Mocked. Attacked. Accused. Depending on where one lives in the world, it is likely one will face persecution and beatings and torture and imprisonment. Maybe even martyrdom and death. In the face of all these things, we are not to repay others in kind. We are not resort to worldly methods to get our way or get back at those who seek our harm. We are not to threaten or coerce or use violence to protect ourselves. We are to entrust our hearts and our lives into God's hands. Jesus bore our sins on the tree so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness and it is by His wounds alone that we are healed. We place our trust in the gospel. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

Friends, "to this you have been called…" What does this look like in real time in your life? Well, if you are a church planter in areas of the world where the gospel has never been proclaimed, it is likely you will face some of the same suffering our Lord faced. You will be threatened. You will be attacked. You will be beaten. You will potentially put your life on the line. Make sure to remember, God is faithful! He will preserve you and protect you and guide you and go with you! You will never be alone! If you live in the West, in a country like America, it is likely your suffering will be more spiritual than physical but it's no less real. I am convinced I live in one of the most spiritually dangerous places on the planet. A community where it is far too easy to become complacent. Far too easy to settle into ease and comfort. Far too easy to avoid risk. A country where it is far too easy to compromise. Where far too many Christians think they can achieve godly ends through ungodly means. Where just about anything seems permissible so long as it aligns with our political, social, and/or cultural ideology. We too need to remember God is faithful! He will preserve us and protect us and guide us and go with us if we will simply trust Him! If we hold His hand even in the dark valleys of our lives, we will not need to fear any evil for He is with us! Always. To the end. This is His promise and it is sure and it is why those who place their faith in Him and follow His example will never be put to shame.

Readings for tomorrow: Hebrews 1-4

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December 20, 2022

Incarnation

Readings for today: Hebrews 1-4

It's Christmas. A season where we celebrate something called the "Incarnation." It's a big word but then again we need big words to describe the miracle of God becoming flesh and blood. God taking a human body for His own. God becoming one of us. How does one begin to describe the infinite becoming finite? The invulnerable becoming vulnerable? The all-powerful becoming powerless? How does one begin to wrap one's head and heart around the reasons why the Creator would empty Himself to become one with His creation? Why the Lord of the universe would leave His throne and humble Himself to become a servant? Why the immortal God would subject Himself to mortality and suffering and death? Then again, perhaps that's the point. The Incarnation is not something we can every fully or truly understand which keeps us coming back each year to marvel at what God has done.

The author of Hebrews helps us probe the mystery a bit. These first four chapters give us a deeper glimpse into what it means that Jesus made Himself one of us. Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature and He upholds the universe by His power. (Heb. 1:3) Jesus is the eternally begotten Son of God who is given dominion and authority and power over all God has made. (Heb. 1:5, 8) Jesus is the Creator who was and is and is to come. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. (Heb. 1:10) At the same time, Jesus is also subject to death and was made perfect through suffering. (Heb. 2:9-10) Jesus was made like us in every respect so that He might identify with us and represent us before God as a faithful high priest. (Heb. 2:17) Jesus is tempted in every way just as we are tempted and though He remains without sin, He can sympathize with us in our weaknesses. (Heb. 4:15)

Why is all this important? What difference does all this make? Again, the author of Hebrews clues us in. Because Jesus is both God and Man. Because Jesus has both a fully divine and fully human nature. Because Jesus offers the perfect sacrifice to God on our behalf. We can approach the throne of grace with confidence and receive mercy and help in our time of need. (Heb. 4:16) We have a faithful, eternal high priest constantly interceding for us in the heavens. We who share in Christ are offered Sabbath rest in Christ which means we can let go of our all fears and anxieties and strivings. This is why Jesus came, friends. God looked down on His creation and saw the creatures He had made in His own image living lives of quiet desperation. Hopeless. Helpless. Struggling. Suffering. Hurting. Wounded. And He loved us so much He refused to let us remain in our pitiful state. Not content to send a servant, He sent His Only Son to show us the full measure of His great love and to deliver us from the power of sin and death and the devil. This is why the Incarnation is so important. This is why we celebrate at Christmas.

Readings for tomorrow: Hebrews 5-8

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December 21, 2022

The Best Story

Readings for today: Hebrews 5-8

The gospel is the best story because it is a true story. Anchored on the promise of God. Sealed by the oath of God. Grounded on the fact that God cannot lie no change His mind. Throughout human history, God has made many promises. He promised Noah deliverance. He promised Abraham a child. He promised Moses victory. He promised David a descendant to sit on his throne. In each case, He swears an oath by Himself. He puts His glory and His honor on the line. And in every case He delivers. He fulfills His promise. Even in the face of our doubts and fears, disobedience and sin, God never wavers. He is faithful.

This is why the author of Hebrews says "We have this sure and steadfast anchor of the soul…" He knows God can be trusted. He knows God has made a promise. The promise of a Savior. The promise of a Messiah. The promise of a King to sit on His throne and a High Priest to intercede in the heavens. God not only made this promise but He swore an oath. He put His glory and honor on the line. He will not let it fail. So by these two "unchangeable things" - the oath and character of God - we have assurance. We have hope. We can hold fast to what God has set before us.

The story of Jesus is no fairy tale. It is no myth or legend. It is not fiction or something any human being made up. Jesus was born. Jesus lived. Jesus suffered. Jesus died. Jesus rose again. These are historical events. You can actually go and see where they took place. You can visit Bethlehem where Jesus was born. You can walk around Galilee and see where Jesus ministered for three years. You can go to Golgotha and see where Jesus was crucified. You can touch the slab where His body lay. Not only that but you can read about these events not only in the Bible but in extra-biblical sources as well. No one disputes that they actually happened. This is what makes the gospel so compelling after all these years. It's true! It's real! It happened! And that's why we celebrate at Christmas!

Readings for tomorrow: Hebrews 9-13

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December 22, 2022

Endurance

Readings for today: Hebrews 9-13

"Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us…" (Hebrews 12:1)

The world is not a friendly place for those who follow Jesus. In some places, the hostility is veiled. It's an undercurrent. It manifests itself subtlety. In such places, Christianity might be perceived as quaint or old-fashioned. Christians themselves are perceived as odd or a little weird. In other places, the hostility is more open. Christianity is perceived as a threat to the wider culture. Christians are accused of being hateful and bigoted. Their way of life is perceived as a clear and present danger to others. Laws are passed to protect the culture from the "threat" of Christianity. Christians are subject to public shame. Some lose their jobs. Some are outcast from their communities. The pressure ratchets up. Finally, there are places where the hostility turns violent. Christianity is perceived not just as wrong or misguided but as evil and heretical. In such places, Christians often suffer tremendous persecution. They are imprisoned. Tortured. Even killed for their faith.

The first Christians faced all these things and more. In those early centuries, there were periods of widespread, intense persecution followed by periods of relative peace. However, even in those peaceful times, Christianity was always perceived as a cultural threat on some level because their way of life was so different. Almost everything they did was baffling to the pagans around them. The way they treated the poor, cared for the sick, or rescued abandoned infants in the countryside seemed strange to those around them. Their moral and sexual ethics definitely placed them at odds with their neighbors. The way they worshipped and gave and held all things in common was confusing in a world of idolatry, greed, and exploitation. And this is why Christians were often targeted. The world simply doesn't tolerate what it doesn't understand.

This is why the author of Hebrews focuses so much attention on faithful endurance. He knows their struggles. He faces them himself. He knows their sufferings. He's probably experienced them as well. He knows life in a hostile world is hard and difficult which is why he continually points them to Jesus as the "author and perfecter of faith." It's why he encourages them to "draw near to Christ with a true heart and full assurance of faith." It's why he exhorts them to "hold fast the confession of hope without wavering." It's why he offers up an entire chapter detailing the lives of the saints who have gone before them who have endured so much. And it's why he warns them against falling into sin lest they find themselves under God's judgment.

"But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls." (Hebrews 10:39) Ultimately, the author of Hebrews wants to encourage his brothers and sisters. He wants them to lay aside every weight. Untangle themselves from every sin. Endure with joy every hardship. Lift their drooping hands and strengthen their weak knees. He wants them to straighten their paths. Strive for peace. Love one another. Lay hold of the Kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Friends, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" which means these words are as much for us today as they were for the Christian believers back then. The world around hasn't changed much since those early days. Here in America, the hostility against Christians only grows. It will take great courage to live out our faith in the years ahead. It will take great endurance to suffer for the sake of Christ. It will take great humility to continue to confront our own sin. But through it all, we have a high priest who is faithful! One who has shed His own blood to open the way to the very throne room of

God. He is more than able to save to the uttermost those who place their trust in Him so keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, friends! He will carry you all the way home!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Timothy 1-4

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December 23, 2022

God-Breathed

Readings for today: 2 Timothy 1-4

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Peter 1-3, Jude 1

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December 24, 2022

Trail Maintenance

Readings for today: 2 Peter 1-3, Jude 1

I joined the Boy Scouts when I was young. By and large, I loved the experience. Loved to camp. Loved to hike. Loved all the adventures. One thing I didn't love was trail maintenance. Our troop adopted a trail down at Hankins Pass. Twice a year we would go there to perform maintenance on the trail. We would cut down trees. Clear any brush. Pick up any trash that had accumulated. The older boys and men would build water bars. Divert streams if necessary. Repair or replace bridges. It wasn't easy work. But because the trail received regular maintenance, it stayed clear and open and many got to enjoy it.

I often think about that experience when I reflect on the journey of faith. When I first came to Christ, it was like I had arrived at a brand new trail head. I was taking a path I had never trod. I was seeking a way where there had been no way. As I stared at the wilderness that lay before me, I realized I would need to cut a new trail in my life. The old ways simply wouldn't do. The old paths I had taken led only to dead ends. Jesus was calling me to a new way. His way. The only way. Listen to how the Apostle Peter describes it in our reading for today…

"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)

The power to follow Jesus does not come from us. I did not have the strength to cut a new trail. I did not have the wisdom to know where to go. But thankfully, Christ Himself grants us His divine power to lead and guide us into all righteousness. In Him, we have everything we need that pertains to life and godliness. With Him at our side, we can cut a new trail of faith through this life. This will require effort. Peter makes this clear. We must make every effort to supplement the faith we've been given with virtue and knowledge and self-discipline and steadfastness and godliness and brotherly affection and love. These qualities come only as we continue to walk the path Jesus lays out for us. They come as we remain in step with His Spirit and maintain our walk before Christ. We cannot grow lazy lest our path become overgrown. We cannot neglect the ordinary means of grace like prayer and Scripture reading and corporate worship lest the path of faith become hidden to our eyes as the wilderness of sin closes back in.

Spiritual growth requires constant maintenance. It requires constant vigilance. It requires constant attention. You must go back over the path again and again and again to make sure it remains well-trod. This is true in every area of life. Habits form new pathways in our brains. The behaviors we engage in shape us as much as we shape them. The choices we make in life are often pre-determined by the path we find ourselves on. So here's the question for us as we come to the end of 2022 and look to begin a new year…are you on the narrow way that leads to Jesus? What new trails is Christ calling you to cut in the 2023? How are you preparing yourself? What's the first step? As you look back on the challenges

of the last year, what impact has 2022 had on your trail of faith? What maintenance do you need to do? What repairs will you need to make? What parts of your trail remain well-trod? As you walk back over the trail of your life, what parts of the trail remain familiar and comfortable? Every year represents a new beginning. A new opportunity to grow in our faith in Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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December 26, 2022

The Meaning of Christmas

Readings for today: 1 John, 2 John, 3 John

I love the opening to John's first letter. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete." (1 John 1:1-4)

John saw Jesus with His own eyes. Touched Him with his own hands. Heard Him speak with his own ears. He saw the Word of Life manifest itself in the Person of Jesus. He experienced Him. He knew Him. He testifies to Him. He dedicates his entire life to proclaiming Him to the world. Jesus was not a mystery to John. His life, death, and resurrection were real. Tangible. Concrete. His was no blind faith.

John understood why Jesus was sent into the world. John, perhaps more than any other New Testament writer, goes to great lengths to convince those to whom he's writing to believe. To place their faith in Christ. To trust in His saving death. This is what makes John's joy complete. The idea that anyone and everyone who reads his letters would enter into deep, intimate fellowship with the Father through the Son.

Christmas, according to John, is not overly sentimental. It is not so much about the birth of a baby as it is about the mission that baby was sent to complete. Jesus was sent to destroy the works of the devil. (1 John 3:8) Jesus was sent to be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. (1 John 2:2) Jesus was sent to cast out fear by laying down His life in perfect love. (1 John 4:18) So yes, celebrate the birth of the Savior! Worship Christ the newborn King! But never forget what our King was sent to do. He was sent to bring life out of death. Light out of darkness. Love out of hate. In order to do that, He had to suffer and die. Become sin itself and descend into the eternal darkness of hell. He had to become the object of hate and rejection and humilitation. All of this, Jesus did for us. Jesus did out of love for us. Jesus did to save us. This is the true meaning of Christmas!

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 1-5

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December 27, 2022

A New Song

Readings for today: Revelation 1-5

Why do Christians sing? I can't tell you the number of times I've been asked that question over the years. Why is singing such a significant part of Christian worship? Why do Christians from every tribe and nation and people group spend so much time and energy creating new songs? Adding new styles and rhythms to the great hymnal of the saints? Why are Christians so passionate about music? To the point where they even get into fights over it! ;-) After all, especially in the West, we are not a "singing" culture. We don't get together to sing anywhere else in our society. At best we sing in the shower or in the car as we drive to work. We might sing at concerts but that's about it. We don't read music anymore. We don't join choirs anymore. Sure, we enjoy music but as a spectator not a participant. So why then does the church still gather to sing?

In the Book of Revelation, it seems clear that heaven is full of singing. The angels sing. The seven spirits of God sing. The elders sing. All the saints who have gone before us - myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands - join their voices together to give praise to God. They even write new music! Music that captures the heart of the gospel. "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth." (Rev. 5:9) There's just something about music that moves the heart. Far more than words. Far more than sermons. Far more than even personal testimonies. Music taps something deep inside us. When we sing together, we literally become part of something bigger than ourselves. A sense of community develops. We experience the power of the many becoming one.

There's nothing quite like it…at least on earth. But heaven is a place where all the barriers that divide us are torn down. All that separates us is replaced by an intimacy and a unity so deep and so profound that perhaps the only way to appropriately express ourselves will be to sing. Sing the songs of Zion. Sing the songs of Emmanuel. Sing the songs of the gospel. The church is called to "rehearse" this reality. Week after week. Month after month. Year after year. The church is where we learn to sing so we can be ready to join the heavenly choir when our time comes. The church is where we get a foretaste of the reality to come and it's why we spend so much of our time singing. It doesn't matter whether we can hold a tune. It doesn't matter whether we can carry a note. It doesn't matter whether we have rhythm or not. All that matters is that we sing from the heart. All that matters is that we give praise to Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 6-10

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December 28, 2022

How Long?

Readings for today: Revelation 6-10

I often meet Christians who believe the Lord is coming back in their lifetime. They look at the world around us and see the evidence of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. The white horse gallops through places like Ukraine where Russia seeks to conquer her former republic. The red horse rides through places like Somalia and South Sudan and Yemen where terrorist groups disrupt peace with violence. The black horse visits nations afflicted by famine due to natural disasters, locust plagues, climate change, and other calamities. And the pale horse eventually comes for us all, bringing not only famine but disease with him. Of course, these four horses don't just ride in other parts of the globe. They are very present here at home as well. The conflict between political parties and extremist groups is real. The violence in cities like Chicago or on the southern border cannot be ignored. The plight of those living in food deserts in communities all over our country or those who struggle to find sustainable housing is heartbreaking. And the death of those we love due to tragedy, diseases like cancer or COVID, or some other event that robs those we love of life is more common than we want to admit.

This is why we cry out with the saints who have gone before us, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:10) I imagine Christians throughout history and around the globe today join us in that same cry. Can you imagine, for example, what it must have felt like to live in Europe during the Black Plague when 1/3 of the population died? Imagine living in the Holy Land when the Crusaders arrived or in Spain under the Inquisition? Imagine what it must have felt like to live under Stalin's purges or the regimes of Pol Pot or Mao Zedong where millions lost their lives? Imagine what it must have felt like to live in the death camps in Nazi Germany or to be Tutsi in Rwanda during the genocide? I don't share these examples to diminish the very real pain and suffering so many of us face on a daily basis but simply to help us gain some perspective on the delay of the parousia or the Lord's return.

God has a plan. He is never early. He is never late. He arrives precisely on time. He sees all the evil that is taking place on the earth and He will one day come to judge the living and the dead. No crime will go unpunished. No wrong will fail to be made right. No injustice will be allowed to stand. No sin will go unaddressed. Those who bear His seal will be saved and will represent a multitude from every tribe, tongue, and nation on the earth. But until that day comes, life on earth will not be easy. We will experience trial and tribulation. But we can take heart for if we persevere in faith, we will receive a white robe, washed in the blood of Jesus Himself. We will find ourselves standing before the throne of God, serving Him day and night. We will hunger no more neither will we thirst. God will wipe away every tear and take away every sadness and make all things new. Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus! Come quickly!

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 11-13

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December 29, 2022

Symbolism

Readings for today: Revelation 11-13

Today's reading is filled with all kinds of symbolism. Symbolic numbers. Symbolic figures. Fantastic visions of beasts and dragons with multiple horns and heads. It's like an installment of Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them. The symbolism is notoriously difficult to decipher. Literally thousands of books have been written over the centuries as Christians attempted to make sense of what the Apostle John is trying to communicate here. Some attempt to take John more literally. They believe there will be two witnesses in Jerusalem who will be killed and then resurrected. They believe the beast is a real person as is the second beast called to prophesy on behalf of the first beast. They have spent all kinds of time trying to tie the number 666 to a specific person whether it be Nero, the pope, Hitler, or some future Anti-Christ who will emerge in the future. Others believe John is speaking more metaphorically. They believe he is describing the persecution of the church using language that can pass the Roman censors who would carefully monitor his communications from his prison on Patmos. They use the Old Testament as a cipher of sorts to make sense of what John writes.

Full disclosure, I tend towards the latter view. It makes the most sense to me. John is living in prison. The early church is facing fairly significant and widespread persecution. He's already seen so many of his friends martyred. Indeed, he is the last of the disciples to survive. The churches he references in the first few chapters of this book are clearly under duress. They face all kinds of oppression, persecution, and violence. They are struggling internally with divisions. It's not an easy time to preach the gospel and the future of the Jesus movement looks dicey at best. As a Jew, John has mastered the Old Testament. He knows it backwards and forwards. It was the only "Scripture" he had at the time as there would be no New Testament for about a hundred years. (Collections of what would become the New Testament started circulating in the 2nd century.) So he draws on the imagery of the Old Testament as he writes knowing his Christian friends all had access to it.

If one takes this position, several things become more clear. 1,260 days or 42 months or 3.5 years (all the same by the way because every month numbered 30 days in the ancient world) refer symbolically to the present age of the church. The age between the first and second comings of Christ where she will undergo great persecution as she preaches the gospel to the world. The two olive trees are a reference to Zerubbabel and Joshua from Zechariah 4 and signify faithful witness as do the two lampstands which are a reference back to the churches in Rev. 1:20. John is encouraging his friends to bear witness even to the point of death and trust the Lord to raise them back up again as He has promised. The woman who gives birth to the Messiah is faithful Israel. She who has been pursued by the devil since the Garden. Satan has been given authority to make war on the saints, much like he was given authority to afflict Job, but it will only be for a time. There have been many beasts throughout history who have promoted blasphemy and idolatry. In John's day, it would have been the emperors of Rome who demanded to be worshipped. To take their mark was to betray the faith. To not take their mark was to become subject to all kinds of persecution. Thus the call for the "endurance and faith of the saints." (Rev. 13:10b) The number 666 probably doesn't refer to a particular person but rather the fulfillment of sin. The number six throughout the Book of Revelation refers to God's judgment on sin just as the number seven refers to God's victory over sin. The number six is seen as the number of "incompletion" or "imperfection" and the number seven is seen as the number of "completion" or "perfection." The triple mention of the number six is an adaptation from the Old Testament where the triple mention of anything signified ultimate importance. "Holy, holy, holy" for example. Not only that but when John says "it is the number of a man", he is most likely referring to general humanity. The Greek word is

anthropos and when used without the definite article - as it is in Rev. 13:18 - it most often is a general reference to humankind not a particular person.

I realize that's a lot to take in so what difference does it all make? Here's where it's important not to miss John's major point. Christ wins. Despite the devil's best efforts, he cannot catch up to the woman. He cannot devour the child. He cannot overcome the Lamb. When God blows the seventh trumpet, "The kingdoms of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ and He shall reign forever and ever." (Rev. 11:15) On that great day, all of faithful Israel and all the faithful saints of the church - symbolized by the twenty-four elders - will fall on their faces in worship before the Lord and give thanks to God for "destroying the destroyers of the earth." (Rev. 11:18)

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 14-18

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December 30, 2022

Blaming God

Readings for today: Revelation 14-18

I know a young man who grew up in our church family who has become an atheist. He and I dialogue from time to time about all that is wrong in the world. He simply cannot bring himself to believe in a good and all-powerful God when there is so much evil and suffering and heartache and pain. I have to admit I sympathize with him. I've seen man's inhumanity to man firsthand. I've been to refugee camps and seen victims of attempted genocide. I've spent time with those dying of starvation or drought or famine. I've prayed with good friends who've been attacked and beaten and threatened for their faith. So I can understand where this young man is coming from. At the same time, I've challenged him as well. What if the problem isn't God but us? What if the issue is the person looking back at us in the mirror? After all, my young friend does very little - by his own admission - to alleviate suffering. He does very little to help those in need. He gives no money. He gives no time. He takes no personal responsibility and this, I believe, is the root of our problems.

When God created the heavens and the earth, He created humanity in His own image. He gave us authority and dominion over all He had made. He entrusted His creation into our hands. He set us up as stewards and through our work the earth would flourish and thrive. He also gave us agency and free will. He didn't want a slave, He wanted a partner. He wanted someone who would care about creation as much as He does. Tragically, we rejected our partnership with God and went our own way. We wanted creation for ourselves and what have we done with it? Exploited it. Abused it. Even raped it at times. We see creation as an expendable resource to satisfy our selfishness and greed. The result is pain. Suffering. Heartbreak. Human beings have an insatiable appetite so those who have much seek more and refuse to share with others. The result is a disproportionate allocation of resources. Some have more than they need while others do not have enough to survive. And rather than try to rectify this situation, we tend to double down. Might makes right. The rich get richer while the poor get poorer. It's survival of the fittest on a global scale.

Is it any wonder the Book of Revelation spends so much time talking about God's judgment? God will not be mocked. He will not let injustice and oppression and sin and evil have the last word. There is coming a day when the seven bowls will be poured out on the earth and the key question for us is this…will we repent? Or will we be like those in Revelation 16 who curse God instead? Will we humble ourselves before the Lord and submit to His sovereign will or will we be like the kings of the earth who match on Jerusalem and the Lamb? Will we repent of the many ways we have contributed to the evils of the world and the sufferings of those around us either by our action or non-action or will we continue to blame God as my young friend does? These are the questions God's Word confronts us with today as we finish our Bible reading for the year. They are great to reflect on as we consider the kinds of changes God is calling us to in 2023.

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 19-22

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December 31, 2022

Come, Lord Jesus

Readings for today: Revelation 19-22

“Come, Lord Jesus!” Echoing Paul’s famous phrase from 1 Corinthians 16:22 - “Maranatha” - John finishes the Revelation with what has become the heartcry of Christians for centuries. Come, Lord Jesus. Come soon. The vision John has received has reached its climax. The new heavens and new earth have come. New Jerusalem has descended out of heaven. God in the midst of her. 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 His promise. The Alpha has issued the final “Omega.” What was once broken is now whole. What was once ruined has now been restored. The incomplete has been brought to completion. It is truly finished. All things are made new.

The delay of the “parousia” or 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 the advice they gave to local churches. 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 everyone hasn’t yet had a chance to hear the good news. Still others believe it’s because the events of Revelation haven’t yet come to pass. The anti-Christ has yet to be revealed and as bad as things may be, they will get much, 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 plans for this world have yet to reach their 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 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!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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