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June 1, 2023
Integrity of the Godly Life

Readings for today: [Proverbs 9-12](#) [\(audio reading\)](#) [\(introduction to Proverbs\)](#)

“Worry weighs us down; a cheerful word picks us up.” (Prov. 12:25 MSG)

I know so many who struggle with crippling anxiety. They are young. They are old. They are men. They are women. They come from all different backgrounds. 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. Isolation. Despite tools like social media, people feel 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. It's actually not hard to see why we are so anxious.

Anxiety in a person's heart does indeed weight 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. “Honesty lives confident and carefree, but Shifty is sure to be exposed.” (Prov. 10:9 MSG) 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 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. It could be a mentor. A Bible study. A small group. And finally, we look for a place to serve our Lord. To give ourselves away for the sake of His Kingdom. These four spiritual practices become the four walls of a spiritual house that is strong and firm and secure because it is built in the Lord.

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 13-16

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June 2, 2023

Plans

Readings for today: Proverbs 13-16 (audio reading)

“Humans are satisfied with whatever looks good; God probes for what is good.”

“Put God in charge of your work, then what you’ve planned will take place.”

“We plan the way we want to live, but only God makes us able to live it.” (Proverbs 16:2-3, 9 MSG)

A dear mentor of mine once gave me the best advice. “Doug”, he said, “I want you to remember something as you go to Wisconsin. You are not going to plant a church. You are going to get involved in what God is doing. Whatever church comes out of it will simply be a byproduct of you joining the Lord in His work in your city. Don’t ever forget this!” Unfortunately, that’s exactly what I did. My mentor was trying to keep me from making a massive mistake. He was trying to keep me from putting the cart before the horse. From putting my plans in front of God’s plan for my life. But in my arrogance and pride, I thought I had it figured out. My way was pure in my eyes. How could it get any more pure than planting a church for Jesus? My heart had already put together a plan but I failed to grasp that it would be the Lord who would establish my steps.

It is so easy for us to fall into this trap. To assume that because we are doing God’s work or engaged in ministry or taking care of our families or having success or because everything we touch is turning to gold on some level that God must be pleased. So we make more plans. We dream more dreams. We keep doing our thing and pretty soon, we forget all about God. We rarely consult Him. We rarely ask Him what He thinks. We rarely bring our plans before the Lord in prayer. And then disaster strikes. The market goes south. We run into roadblocks. We experience failure. And we cry out to God...what happened? Why me? What went wrong?

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who labor, labor in vain. Unless the Lord establishes our steps, we will stumble and fall. Unless the Lord has commissioned our work, it will fall apart. Unless the Lord is with us, our ways can never be pure. So how do we surrender our will to God? How can we live in such a way that allows God to direct our steps? When I was in Wisconsin, I picked back up a practice I had not done in years. It’s called the daily examen. It’s the simple practice of bringing the details of our day before the Lord each morning and night. Every morning when we wake up, we take our schedule of activities to God in prayer. We pay close attention to our hearts as we do. What makes us anxious today? What brings us peace? What are we excited about? Who are we energized to see? Who drains us just thinking about them? Why? What is the source of our fear? As we bring those things to God, we ask Him to make us aware of His abiding presence. We ask Him for wisdom to guide our conversations. Insight so we might know the next step to take. We ask Him to show us those things that lead to consolation and peace while also revealing to us those things that lead to desolation and pain. And then at the end of each day, we repeat the exercise as we look back. What went well? What was hard? Where did God make Himself known? What did God say along the way? Where did we sense God’s abiding presence? Where did He feel absent? Why? What did we learn? It doesn’t take that long and yet it can make a huge difference in helping us understand the difference between asking God for His plan or asking God to bless our plan for our lives.

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 17-20

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June 3, 2023
Fact Check

Readings for today: Proverbs 17-20 (audio reading)

The truth is almost impossible to discern these days. Every news story has an angle. Every commentator has an agenda. Every social media post has a slant. All of them designed for a particular audience. Just about every day, I scan the headlines of the BBC, CNN, and FoxNews. Sometimes I add in MSNBC as well. I read the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times. I scroll through Twitter where I intentionally follow a diverse group of people from across the social, political, and religious spectrum. And while my sample size isn't all that big, it's also not small and the thing I've learned over the years is never take anything at face value. Make sure you try to listen and understand all the perspectives in play on a particular issue before you draw any conclusions. Where did I learn this from? King Solomon. Listen to how he puts it,

“The first speech in a court case is always convincing— until the cross-examination starts!” (Proverbs 18:17 MSG)

We have a tendency to believe the first thing we hear especially if it comes from a member of our tribe. We have a tendency to rush to judgment especially if it involves the member of a different tribe. Democrats accuse Republicans and Republicans accuse Democrats. Conservatives accuse Progressives and Progressives accuse Conservatives. Evangelicals accuse Exvangelicals and Exvangelicals accuse Evangelicals. Blacks accuse Whites and Whites accuse Blacks. Gays accuse Straights and Straights accuse Gays. The list is almost endless. Each side assuming the worst of the other. Each side only considering the evidence that fits their particular narrative. Each side accusing the other of operating in bad faith. It's a brutal, vicious cycle that can only end one way. The complete and total destruction of the “other.” It's why we see violence and hatred and outrage ratcheting up to dangerous levels. Because there can be no compromise with the enemy. The only righteous and just thing to do is destroy them.

The one who first states their case always seems so right until we get to hear the other side. As Christians, we are called to discern the truth. We must reject falsehoods or half-truths of any kind. We are not given the option to embrace that which supports our own personal tribal narrative. And we never operate in an underhanded, manipulative, deceitful way. We walk in the light as children of the light. We walk with complete honesty and transparency before the Lord and before the world. We listen before we speak. We make a complete investigation before we draw any conclusions. We never assume. And we always try to engage in good faith and with the best intentions. As of the writing of this blog, some 63% of Americans identify as Christians. That's approximately 210 million people. Imagine the impact we could make if we would simply commit to follow Solomon's advice from the Proverbs? Imagine how the spheres of politics, media, and mass culture would change if we would commit ourselves to seek the truth and speak the truth all in love?

Readings for tomorrow: None

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June 5, 2023
Good Leadership

Readings for today: Proverbs 21-24 (audio reading)

What makes for good leadership? What's the most important characteristic a good leader can cultivate? How should those of us who live under the authority of leaders, whether it be in the political or economic or educational or religious spheres, pray for them? How should we be interceding on their behalf before the Lord?

The most important quality of a good leader is humility. They are simply an instrument in God's hands. They are a tool in God's toolbox. As Proverbs 21:1 puts it in our reading today, "Good leadership is a channel of water controlled by God." Just as a stream doesn't chart its own course but follows the contours of the land, so we are not the captains of our own destinies nor are we the masters of our own fates. There is so much beyond our control. So much going on in the world that we have little influence over. So much going on beneath the surface of even our own bodies that remains a mystery.

How many leaders get drunk on power? How many leaders abuse their position and authority? How many leaders exploit their resources? Sure, there are the easily identified examples. People who break the law or do horrible things. Their names are legion. Madoff. Epstein. Weinstein. Zacharias. Driscoll. The religious leaders who sexually abuse women and children. But what about the examples that are far more subtle? The ones that fly under the radar? What about someone like me? I am a leader in my home. How do my wife and children experience my leadership? I am a leader in my church. How those I work with and among experience my leadership? I am a leader in my denomination. How do my colleagues experience my leadership? Would any of them say Doug's leadership is a "channel of water controlled by God?" Would any of them characterize me as a humble leader? I hope so.

Humility is not thinking more highly of oneself than one ought nor thinking less of oneself than one ought. It's simply thinking of oneself less. This is what it means to submit in humility to God. To let Him control the "channels" of your life. To let Him guide and direct your steps. It means never promoting oneself. Never protecting oneself. Never serving oneself. It means being content to labor in obscurity. Embrace anonymity. And pursue insignificance. It means taking the lowest place at the Master's table, letting Him raise you up in His time and according to His will. It means letting God "direct your life to whatever ends He chooses."

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 5-6, 2 Chronicles 2-3

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June 6, 2023
God's Temple

Readings for today: 1 Kings 5-6, 2 Chronicles 2-3 (audio reading)

Today's reading ties together several threads in Old Testament history. Here are a couple of the key texts...

"So Solomon broke ground, launched construction of the house of God in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, the place where God had appeared to his father David. The precise site, the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, had been designated by David." (2 Chronicles 3:1 MSG)

"Four hundred and eighty years after the Israelites came out of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's rule over Israel, in the month of Ziv, the second month, Solomon started building The Temple of God." (1 Kings 6:1 MSG)

"The word of God came to Solomon saying, "About this Temple you are building—what's important is that you live the way I've set out for you and do what I tell you, following my instructions carefully and obediently. Then I'll complete in you the promise I made to David your father. I'll personally take up my residence among the Israelites—I won't desert my people Israel." (1 Kings 6:11-13 MSG)

Mount Moriah is the modern-day Temple Mount. It's the place where Solomon built his Temple. It's also the place where the 2nd Temple was built by Zerubbabel which is the same Temple King Herod expanded and remodeled during his reign. But that's not the only place Mt. Moriah is mentioned in Scripture. Moriah is also the region where Abraham went to sacrifice Isaac and it was on one of the mountains in that region that Abraham built his altar. Those of you who remember the story from Genesis 22, probably recall it was the angel of the Lord who appeared to stay Abraham's hand. Mt. Moriah is also the place where King David saw the angel of the Lord relent from his destruction of Jerusalem at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. 1 Chron. 21:16 tells us, "David lifted up his eyes and saw the angel of the Lord standing between earth and heaven..." This is really what temples were all about in the ancient world. They were the places where heaven and earth came together. A "thin space" if you will where the veil of this world peels back as God intervenes to meet us in a powerful way.

The timing of the Temple is important as well. 480 years have passed since Israel first set out on their Exodus journey. Whether the number is literal or symbolic, there was theological significance attached to it because the Temple represented in a very real way the fulfillment of all God's promises. He had delivered His people from slavery. He had given them the Promised Land. He had conquered their enemies and now they were at peace with their neighbors. Everything God said He would do, He did and the building of the Temple served as a monument to God's great faithfulness.

Finally, the Temple represented the fulfillment of the covenant of God. It was the completion of the promise God made to David, Solomon's father, and it represented the eternal nature of the relationship God desired to have with His people. If Solomon - and by extension Solomon's people - will walk in faithful obedience before the Lord, God would be with them. He would live with them and dwell with them. He would bless them and protect them. He would guide them and give them a hope and a future.

So what's our takeaway? How is a passage like this relevant for our daily lives? Well, first and foremost, I think it's important for us to recognize sacred space. Particular places or particular times

and seasons where God showed up in a powerful way. Bending the heavens to come to earth to perform a miracle or do a mighty work on our behalf. Such spaces will hold a special place in our hearts as well they should. Second, we need to recognize the importance of God's timing. He may not work as quickly as we would like or on the timeline we'd prefer but He is always faithful to His promises. Our job is walk in faith. Walk in obedience. Surrender our lives into His hands. Finally, and most importantly, we need to remember that we are now temples of the Living God. We are walking, talking "Mt. Moriah's" due to the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. God has touched down in our lives. He has done something in our hearts. And we need to praise Him continually for the miracle of spiritual rebirth.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 7-8, Psalm 11

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June 7, 2023
Relationship

Readings for today: 1 Kings 7-8, Psalm 11 (audio reading)

What does it mean to be in relationship with God? I've been helping some people in my life wrestle with this idea lately. We've been having lots of conversations about God and what and why to believe. Over and over again, they keep coming back to religion. They talk about God as an abstract, philosophical idea. They talk about codes of ethics. They talk about laws and rules and expectations. And they struggle because they cannot imagine aligning their life along these lines. It feels arbitrary. Coercive. One of them was at least honest with me and said, "You know I'm pretty much anti-authority, right?" ;-)

My response in these conversations is to try to reframe their thinking around relationship. If our connection to God is mediated through religion then I can understand their objections. Why would anyone want to submit their life to a set of rules that necessarily limited their freedoms? That doesn't have much appeal to me either. But what if our connection to God was mediated through a relationship? What if God was good and loving and could be trusted to know what's best for us? Wouldn't that change things?

This is the heart behind Solomon's great prayer of dedication. Yes, there were a lot of rules and rituals associated with Temple worship but at its foundation is a covenantal relationship with the Living God. You see this mapped out in the different examples Solomon cites from everyday life when he prays...

"When someone hurts a neighbor and promises to make things right, and then comes and repeats the promise before your Altar in this Temple, listen from heaven and act accordingly: Judge your servants, making the offender pay for his offense and setting the offended free of any charges." (1 Kings 8:31-32 MSG)

"When your people Israel are beaten by an enemy because they've sinned against you, but then turn to you and acknowledge your rule in prayers desperate and devout in this Temple, Listen from your home in heaven, forgive the sin of your people Israel, return them to the land you gave their ancestors." (1 Kings 8:33-34 MSG)

"When the skies shrivel up and there is no rain because your people have sinned against you, but then they pray at this place, acknowledging your rule and quitting their sins because you have scourged them, Listen from your home in heaven, forgive the sins of your servants, your people Israel. Then start over with them: Train them to live right and well; send rain on the land you gave your people as an inheritance." (1 Kings 8:35-36 MSG)

"When disasters strike, famine or catastrophe, crop failure or disease, locust or beetle, or when an enemy attacks their defenses—calamity of any sort—any prayer that's prayed from anyone at all among your people Israel, hearts penetrated by the disaster, hands and arms thrown out to this Temple for help, Listen from your home in heaven. Forgive and go to work on us. Give what each deserves, for you know each life from the inside (you're the only one with such "inside knowledge"!) so that they'll live before you in lifelong reverent and believing obedience on this land you gave our ancestors." (1 Kings 8:37-40 MSG)

Clearly, Solomon has more in view than just religion here. He believes with His whole heart that God Himself has come to dwell with His people. Come to meet with His people face to face. Come to show His great love to His people in person. It's a powerful prayer and an even more powerful way to think about faith in God. Faith in God is not a commitment to certain ethical code. It is not a belief in an abstract set of theological principles. It is the most intimate relationship we can have in this life because we are relating to the same God who shaped and formed us in our mother's wombs. The same God who loved us and called us by name from eternity. The same God who bled and died for us on the cross. The same God who rose again to open the way to heaven. The same God who's coming again to claim His own, set all things right, and make all things new. This is the God we worship and adore and He invites us into His presence so we can know Him and love Him and worship Him.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 4-7, Psalms 134, 136

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June 8, 2023
Praying for Revival

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 4-7, Psalms 134, 136 (audio reading)

“If my people, my God-defined people, respond by humbling themselves, praying, seeking my presence, and turning their backs on their wicked lives, I’ll be there ready for you: I’ll listen from heaven, forgive their sins, and restore their land to health.” (2 Chronicles 7:14 MSG)

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 and secondary theological 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 9, 2023
Praise the Lord!

Readings for today: Psalms 146-150 (audio reading)

I love these final Psalms. My heart leaps every year when we get to this point in our Bible reading. Probably because I love to sing. I was taught to sing by my mother from the moment I came into this world. She was a gifted musician and teacher who instilled in me a deep love for music. It didn't matter the style. The instrumentation wasn't important. We sang in the home around her piano. We sang in church at her side. We sang as we did our chores. In fact, I still sing while I do the dishes to this day! Making up words to silly songs to simply pass the time. My family looks at me like I'm crazy. Ha!

The Psalms are songs. I know it sounds so basic and yet it's so easy to forget. Reading the words in English just doesn't do the Hebrew poetry justice. We lose something important in translation. We aren't familiar with the tunes and so we reduce the Psalms to just words on a page rather than songs in hearts. But the Psalms represent the hymnal for ancient Israel. These were the songs they sang when they came to worship. Over and over again, they would repeat them. They knew each of them by heart. They sang them with all their might in the congregation, especially when it was time to gather for festivals in Jerusalem. These songs focus their attention on God. His greatness. His faithfulness. His goodness. His grace. Very little attention is paid to us or our feelings or our experiences. The Psalms send our thoughts soaring as we contemplate the immensity of the Lord. Can you imagine worshipping with God's people at the Temple? Can you imagine joining all of Israel at the Temple and singing them at the top of your lungs.? Wave after wave of sound ascending to the heavens? Hearts on fire? Passion for God enflamed? Love for Him crescendoing? The worship of God overwhelming the senses? It must have been so powerful to witness and experience

I have worshipped with Christians around the world. I have worshipped with Christians in cathedrals and stick huts, in beautiful auditoriums and living rooms in homes, in prisons and in stadiums. I have worshipped in formal and informal setting. I have worshipped in churches with elaborate ritual and liturgy and churches that were free-flowing and extemporaneous. I have worshipped with Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Baptists, charismatics, and Pentecostals. I have worshipped in African-American churches, Asian-American churches, ethnic/immigrant churches, and suburban white churches. Again, the style doesn't matter. The format doesn't matter. The instrumentation doesn't matter. What matters is the heart. Worshipping without any self-conscious pride or ego or insecurities or worries or anxieties. Worshipping without any sense of judgment or personal preference. In such places, the joy is palpable. The sense of love is extraordinary. The fellowship is rich. And the worship is powerful.

How do we get from here to there? We worship like Israel. We 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) We recount God's goodness. We praise God's greatness. We sing about God's provision. God's protection. God's miraculous healing. God's deliverance from evil.

Like Israel, we praise the God "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) We thank God for the rain that brings life to our dry land. We praise God for the flowers as they bloom, the crops as they rise, the herds as they flourish, the grass on the hillsides as it grows rich and full and green.

Like Israel, we acknowledge that when we praise our God, we are joining our voices with the heavens and the earth. The heavenly host and the saints who have gone before us. We 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)

Oh, how I hope and pray for the day when we can abandon ourselves to worship in the way Israel once did! Oh, how 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 so many of our brothers and sisters throughout history and around the world! Oh, how I long for the day when we would come face to face with our God! See 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 10, 2023
The Next Generation

Readings for today: 1 Kings 9, 2 Chronicles 8, Proverbs 25-26 (audio reading)

Someone once told me, “Christianity is always one generation away from extinction.” I’ve never forgotten those words. Christians are not just born. They are born again. Being raised in the faith isn’t enough. Being raised in the church isn’t enough. As much as we trust and believe Proverbs 22:6, “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it”; there are no guarantees. Every generation must come face to face with God. Every generation must deal personally with God. The covenant must be renewed. Faith must be received.

David had lived a faithful life. Not a perfect life, of course. A faithful life. He was a man after God’s own heart and presumably he had “trained up” Solomon in the faith. Taught Him the Law of God. Showed Him how to love God. Encouraged him to obey God. However, Solomon needed to have his own face to face with God. So after the Temple had been built...after Solomon gained a reputation for wisdom...in the midst of all the building projects, success, fortune and fame; God had a sit down with Solomon. It was time to define the relationship. To renew the covenant. Walk in my ways and you will be blessed. Reject my ways and you will be punished. And oh by the way, because you are king, your decisions won’t just impact you but the entire nation. No pressure!

“And God said to him, “I’ve listened to and received all your prayers, your ever-so-passionate prayers. I’ve sanctified this Temple that you have built: My Name is stamped on it forever; my eyes are on it and my heart in it always. As for you, if you live in my presence as your father David lived, pure in heart and action, living the life I’ve set out for you, attentively obedient to my guidance and judgments, then I’ll back your kingly rule over Israel, make it a sure thing on a solid foundation. The same guarantee I gave David your father I’m giving you: ‘You can count on always having a descendant on Israel’s throne.’” (1 Kings 9:3-5 MSG)

Interestingly enough, Scripture doesn’t record Solomon’s response. The implication, I believe, is that Solomon’s life from this point forward will serve as his “answer.” Faith is so much more than raising a hand and making a verbal profession. True saving faith becomes evident in the way one chooses to live their lives. From the moment we accept Christ, is there growing evidence of a spiritual transformation? A hunger and thirst for God’s Word? A desire to spend time with God in prayer? Do we see evidence of the fruit of the Spirit? Is there a passion to serve God and share the good news of the gospel? Or does life go on as normal? I’ve been a pastor for over 20 years now and the tragic, heartbreaking reality is there are so many people who are “Christian” in name only. They raised their hand at camp as a teenager but their adult lives show no evidence of saving faith. They were raised in the church, perhaps even still go to church, but they’ve never personally surrendered their lives to Jesus Christ.

Here’s the God’s honest truth, friends. Every generation must come face to face with God. Every generation must encounter Him personally and directly. There is no such thing as a 2nd generation Christian. Every generation must be born again of water and of Spirit to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. And it is the job of each generation to reach the next generation with the good news of the gospel.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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June 12, 2023
The Cost of Unbelief

Readings for today: Proverbs 27-29 (audio reading)

There is a cost to unbelief. I know we like to pretend otherwise but there is no neutral territory in this world. One is either enslaved to sin or set free by Christ. One is helpless in the face of their warped desires or one has had their desires transformed by the Holy Spirit. One is either confused and ignorant of the righteousness of God or one is filled with the wisdom and knowledge of the Lord. There are no other options. Not according to Proverbs.

We see this cost on display right now in our country. Proverbs 28:2 says, “When there is moral rot within a nation, its government topples easily. But wise and knowledgeable leaders bring stability.” This is why character matters in our leaders. And not just any character will do. We need godly leaders. Leaders whose hearts have been transformed by the love of Christ and who extend that love out to others. Leaders who actively seek God’s counsel for wisdom and insight on how to tackle the massively complex problems that we are facing. Leaders who are unapologetic when it comes to standing for God’s truth as it is revealed through creation, science, Scripture, and the natural order of things. Leaders who are selfless and generous and honest and have integrity. Leaders who are not driven by the “will to power” but the “will to serve.”

Think of all the problems we face as a society. Political corruption at the highest levels. Social experiments when it comes to gender and sexuality. Astronomically high rates of depression and anxiety and suicidal ideation. Outbreaks of violence that far outpace any other country on earth. Massive rates of incarceration that disproportionately impacts communities of color and/or impoverished communities. An unsustainable, ever-widening gap between rich and poor. Significant rise in hate crimes across the board in almost every social group. And it seems like all our leaders can do is fiddle while Rome burns.

Solomon proposes a different way in the Proverbs. He reminds us of some important truths that could potentially turn the tide if we would submit our ways to God’s way. Listen to some of the examples from our reading today...

Proverbs 27 - He teaches us that anger and wrath and jealousy are all dangerous emotions not to be entertained. He teaches us to be humble rather than proud. He reminds us to plan wisely and take precautions for the future. And he encourages us receive rebukes from a friend as a blessing.

Proverbs 28 - He calls out those who rebel against God’s law. He warns against corruption and immorality. He especially focuses on those who intentionally pursue evil and teach others to do the same. He reminds us of the danger of wicked people in places of influence and power. He challenges our greed and desire for ill-gotten wealth.

Proverbs 29 - He closes by casting a positive vision for a nation. He lifts up the virtues of humility, godliness, wisdom, justice, righteousness, compassion, discipline, and trusting in the Lord. Blessed is the nation led by leaders who treasure such things! Blessed are the communities whose people embrace such values.

Yesterday, the church I lead had the opportunity to bless our town. Each year we are invited to hold a worship service on the main stage of the main event of the year. The Parker Days Festival draws

thousands from all over our state each year and the funds collected are essential for the operation of our local Chamber of Commerce. It is such a blessing to be asked to serve our town in this unique way and it's something we don't take for granted. As we worshipped, we prayed for our town and our leaders and the people in our community. We asked God to pour out His Spirit and draw us to Christ. We asked God to bring everyone to saving faith in His Son so our town might be blessed and thrive and flourish under His sovereign Lordship. Finally, we challenged each other to put into practice a lot of what Solomon has to say with the hope that as more and more people come to know Christ, the price we have to pay for unbelief in our community will go down. Make it so, Lord Jesus, make it so for the sake of your great Name and your great Glory!

Readings for tomorrow: Ecclesiastes 1-6

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June 13, 2023
Chasing the Wind

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 1-6 (audio reading)

Robin Williams. Kate Spade. Anthony Bourdain. These are the famous faces of suicide. I could name several more from my own community who are not as famous. Kids. Young adults. Men and women in their late fifties and early sixties who feel they have nothing left to live for. According to the CDC, suicide rates have increased an astronomical 36% in the last twenty years. And though there was an apparent decrease in 2019-2020, as they process the post-pandemic data, rates are expected to go up once again. It is now the 11th leading cause of death. The factors influencing suicidal ideation are manifold. Mental health problems. Relationship issues. Job loss. Financial pressures. Substance abuse. Post-pandemic stress and anxiety. And it often strikes without warning. Colorado has one of the highest suicide rates in the nation and Douglas County, where I live, struggles significantly with this issue. I remember four teenagers in our area taking their own lives several years ago in the span of just 11 days! Sadly, it's unfortunately a rare year when our church doesn't perform the funeral of at least one suicide victim.

"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." (Ecclesiastes 1:2) The writer of Ecclesiastes (traditionally ascribed to Solomon) clearly takes a dim view of life. Work is vanity. Riches are vanity. Pleasure is vanity. Success is vanity. Wisdom is vanity. All is vanity. What do we gain by working so hard? No one remembers us after we're gone. Our wealth is passed on to another to enjoy. The righteous and unrighteous both die and are laid in the grave. All end up as dust. Clearly the Teacher is depressed. He looks around at all he has accomplished in his life and abandons all hope. He finds no meaning in anything he has done or accomplished. All he has to show for all his hard work and toil and pursuit of wisdom is sorrow, grief, and pain. It's not easy to read. It feels like we're reading the Teacher's personal journal and hearing his inmost thoughts as he grapples with despair.

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Ecclesiastes 7-12

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June 14, 2023
Remember your Creator

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 7-12 (audio reading)

Remember your Creator. This is the advice of the Teacher in the final chapter of Ecclesiastes. He recognizes - probably from his own life - our very human tendency to forget God in the midst of life. We forget Him when we are young. We forget Him when the sun is shining and times are good. We forget Him when we are strong and able. We forget Him when we are full of life and energy and without a care in the world. We forget Him when all kinds of opportunities are coming our way. We forget Him when we are at the height of our success and influence and wealth and power. And lest we think we are immune to this temptation, we need to remind ourselves Solomon was all these things and more.

The key is to fear God and obey His commands. But that's easier said than done as well. Fearing God doesn't come naturally to us. It must be trained if it is to be ingrained. It comes as a result of time spent every day with our Creator. It requires a weekly gathering with God's people to reorient the self-centered desires of our hearts. It comes through intentionality as we allow others into our lives and share transparently with them so they can hold us accountable. These are the formational practices Christians have employed for centuries in some form or another in order to "remember their Creator."

Furthermore, obeying God's commands takes daily practice. We must meditate on His Word day and night so we know what He expects from us. We must memorize His commands so we can take them to heart. We must hide His Word in our hearts if we are to resist sin and take our stand against the evil one. After all, we cannot obey God's commands if we do not know them. And we cannot know God's commands unless we commit ourselves to studying them. So many people claim to know Christ but they have no idea how to follow Him. They claim to love Christ but seemingly have no interest in obeying Him. It must break God's heart to see His children pursue a way of life apart from Him. Imagine the impact we could have on the world if we would remember God when we are strong and young and energetic and excited? Imagine what would happen if we would give God the firstfruits of our lives rather than the leftovers after we have primarily served ourselves? Imagine how different our lives would be if we gave God the best years of our life? We don't have to imagine. We simply have to start right where we find ourselves today.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 10-11, 2 Chronicles 9, Proverbs 30-31

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June 15, 2023
Dangers of Wealth

Readings for today: 1 Kings 10-11, 2 Chronicles 9, Proverbs 30-31

[\(audio reading\)](#)

“God, I’m asking for two things before I die; don’t refuse me— Banish lies from my lips and liars from my presence. Give me enough to live on, neither too much nor too little. If I have too much, I might get independent, saying, ‘God? Who needs him?’ If I’m poor, I might steal and dishonor the name of my God.” (Proverbs 30:7-9)

Today shows us why it is so good to read the Bible chronologically. Juxtaposing these verses over and against the reign of Solomon provides a striking image for us to reflect upon. 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 is the very real spiritual dangers that accompany such wealth.

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 \$1,955 dollars. \$1955 per ounce multiplied by sixteen to get to a pound is \$31,280. $\$31,280 \times 40,000 = \1.25 billion dollars per year in today’s dollars! 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.

“Lust for money brings trouble and nothing but trouble. Going down that path, some lose their footing in the faith completely and live to regret it bitterly ever after.” (1 Timothy 6:10 MSG) It is often said that money itself is not evil but only the love of money. This is true. However, because I am a sinner I have a tendency to fall in love with money when you place it in my hands. I almost cannot help myself. My heart is corrupt and naturally falls in love with material things. The more I have, the more susceptible I am to this particular sin.

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 tenth of a percent of the world’s wealthiest people. Furthermore, America is one of the wealthiest nations to have ever existed on earth which means I rank among some of the wealthiest people ever to have lived. And while there are great blessings that come with such wealth, we have to acknowledge there is also great spiritual danger. We too have a tendency to forget God. We too have a tendency to be self-reliant. Self-sufficient. Self-dependent. Is it any wonder then that we suffer from high rates of anxiety, depression, opioid addiction, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation? In our “affluenza”, we have forgotten God. Our only hope is to repent and turn back to Him. To sacrificially and generously give away our wealth so that it loosens its grip on us. We must seek to store up treasures in heaven for where our treasure is, so our heart will be also.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 12, 2 Chronicles 10

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June 16, 2023
The Sin of Entitlement

Readings for today: 1 Kings 12, 2 Chronicles 10 (audio reading)

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. 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, at least in part, 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 traveled to Shechem where all Israel had gathered to inaugurate him as king.” (1 Kings 12:1 MSG) 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, be considerate of their needs and respond with compassion, work things out with them, they’ll end up doing anything for you.” (1 Kings 12:7 MSG) 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. He believed they existed 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. “The young turks he’d grown up with said, “These people who complain, ‘Your father was too hard on us; lighten up’—well, tell them this: ‘My little finger is thicker than my father’s waist. If you think life under my father was hard, you haven’t seen the half of it. My father thrashed you with whips; I’ll beat you bloody with chains!’” (1 Kings 12:10-11 MSG) 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 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 you do 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 17, 2023
Fear over Faith

Readings for today: 1 Kings 13-14, 2 Chronicles 11-12 (audio reading)

The opposite of faith is not doubt. It's not even unbelief. The opposite of faith is fear. Fear that something might happen. Fear that something might not come to pass. Fear that we might suffer loss in some way or that the risk is too great. Faith requires something from us. In fact, I would argue faith requires EVERYTHING from us. It requires us to relinquish control to God. It requires us to trust God for His provision and His plan. It requires us to step forward though the way is often unclear. It requires us to act even though we may not see a way through or understand how everything might work out.

Jeroboam has a chance to step out in faith. He has an opportunity to place his life in God's hands just as David once did. He has a chance to establish his dynasty in the Kingdom of Israel forever. All he has to do is trust God. All he has to do is believe God will deliver on His promises. But Jeroboam gives into fear. He's afraid he will lose his kingdom. He's afraid he will lose the favor of the people. He's afraid everything he has gained through God's grace will be lost. "But then Jeroboam thought, "It won't be long before the kingdom is reunited under David. As soon as these people resume worship at The Temple of God in Jerusalem, they'll start thinking of Rehoboam king of Judah as their ruler. They'll then kill me and go back to King Rehoboam." So the king came up with a plan: He made two golden calves. Then he announced, "It's too much trouble for you to go to Jerusalem to worship. Look at these—the gods who brought you out of Egypt!" He put one calf in Bethel; the other he placed in Dan. This was blatant sin. Think of it—people traveling all the way to Dan to worship a calf! And that wasn't the end of it. Jeroboam built forbidden shrines all over the place and recruited priests from wherever he could find them, regardless of whether they were fit for the job or not. To top it off, he created a holy New Year festival to be held on the fifteenth day of the eighth month to replace the one in Judah, complete with worship offered on the Altar at Bethel and sacrificing before the calves he had set up there. He staffed Bethel with priests from the local shrines he had made. This was strictly his own idea to compete with the feast in Judah; and he carried it off with flair, a festival exclusively for Israel, Jeroboam himself leading the worship at the Altar." (1 Kings 12:26-33 MSG)

Though Jeroboam had won the kingdom through no power of his own, he turned around and worked to secure his kingdom in his own strength and according to his own wisdom. Instead of depending on the same God who made him king, he abandoned God and went his own way. Literally created a new, false system of worship to replace the true worship of the Living God. He engaged in idolatry and blasphemy at the highest levels and, as a result, doomed his kingdom and his family. Listen to God's response again, "I raised you up from obscurity and made you the leader of my people Israel. I ripped the kingdom from the hands of David's family and gave it to you, but you weren't at all like my servant David who did what I told him and lived from his undivided heart, pleasing me. Instead you've set a new record in works of evil by making alien gods—tin gods! Pushing me aside and turning your back—you've made me mighty angry. And I'll not put up with it: I'm bringing doom on the household of Jeroboam, killing the lot of them right down to the last male wretch in Israel, whether slave or free. They've become nothing but garbage and I'm getting rid of them. The ones who die in the city will be eaten by stray dogs; the ones who die out in the country will be eaten by carrion crows. God's decree!" (1 Kings 14:6-11 MSG) God's judgment is terrifying. Everything in it comes to pass just as God declared it would. All because Jeroboam gave into fear.

What about us? Where do we find ourselves struggling with fear over faith? How do we even begin to identify the fears that lurk within our hearts? One suggestion is to consider what most commonly keeps

you up at night. Think about any recurring nightmares you may have. What are the common themes? What is it that makes you anxious on a regular basis? Chances are those are the fears that keep you from stepping out in faith. Where have you found yourself saying, “Oh, I could never do that.” Have you ever asked why? God is calling us to walk by faith, friends, not by fear. He calls us out of our comfort zones. Out of the places where we feel the most safe and secure. He calls us to a life of great risk. He takes us to the end of ourselves, the end of our resources, the end of our strength and wisdom and beyond. Why? To teach us about the sufficiency of His grace and to expand His Kingdom across the earth. Don’t be like Jeroboam. Don’t give into your fears. Trust God!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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June 19, 2023
A Daily Choice

Readings for today: 1 Kings 15:1-24, 2 Chronicles 13-16 (audio reading)

Every day we wake up facing the same choice. Will we place our trust in God or will we trust in human strength and wisdom? Will believe God when He says He will be with us or will we set up contingency plans just in case He doesn't come through? Will we walk by faith or will we give into fear?

The accounts of the kings of Israel and Judah set these choices in stark terms. Abijah trusts God for his victory over Jeroboam and his much smaller army routs the larger army of Israel. Asa clears the land of pagan shrines and prostitutes, deposes his grandmother for committing blasphemy, and defeats a massive Ethiopian army many times the size of his own. However, each of these men had their issues as well. Abijah was not whole-hearted in his devotion to the Lord. Asa end his reign by cutting deals with the pagan nations around him rather than continuing to place his faith in God. Both of these kings faced choices every day just like we face choices every day and the impact of their choices rippled out to those they loved and served.

We are not kings nor do we live in ancient Israel but the challenge for remains the same. Will we trust God when we face challenges? Some of which may seem insurmountable? I think about the challenge of aging. As we get older and our bodies fail or our minds wander, will we trust God and embrace the aging process with grace or will we do all we can to hold onto our fading youth? I think about the challenge of suffering. Maybe it's a chronic illness or mental health condition. Will we engage God in prayer for healing even as we seek the help of the professionals He provides or will we allow our condition to make us bitter and frustrated and angry? I think about the challenge of doing hard things. This seems to be especially difficult for many of our young people these days. Will we trust God for the strength to overcome the obstacles life often puts before us or will we simply give up? I think about the fight against injustice in our world. So many assume we are powerless before the forces arrayed against us. The "powers and principalities" are too deeply entrenched for us to root out. Will we trust God and speak up for those who have no voice? Perhaps most importantly, I think about the people in our lives whom we love who are lost and wandering spiritually. Will we trust God and share the gospel with them patiently and persistently and prayerfully with the hope that one day they will turn and place their faith in Christ?

Every day we are faced with these and/or similar decisions. Every day the impact of the decisions we make ripples out on those we love and serve. Every day we get to choose whether we will trust God or trust ourselves. Will you place your life, your resources, your future in His hands?

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 15:25-34, 1 Kings 16, 2 Chronicles 17

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June 20, 2023
Godly Courage

Readings for today: 1 Kings 15:25-34, 1 Kings 16, 2 Chronicles 17 (audio reading)

Humanity is broken. Though originally created in God's own image to bring beauty and goodness to the world; we lost our way. Exiled from the Garden because of sin, we find ourselves wandering in the shadowlands of our own making. We grope our way through the darkness, struggling to make any kind of progress. We are at the mercy of something twisted deep inside us that causes us to choose sin over and over again. We just can't seem to help ourselves. Proverbs 26:11 describes it viscerally, "Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly." We see this pattern repeated throughout Scriptures. From Genesis to Revelation, God reaches out to humanity. Raises up men and women after His own heart. Noah. Abraham and Sarah. Moses. Joshua. Deborah. Hannah. Samuel. David. But with each passing generation, things seemingly 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 God and 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? 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 he sends out evangelists to them! 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 21, 2023
The Reason for Evil

Readings for today: 1 Kings 17-19 (audio rezading)

The Bible could not be more clear. The source of all the evil and suffering and trouble and heartache in the world is because humanity continues to chase all the wrong gods. Our idolatry is literally killing us and those we love and live among. In ancient Israel, the idols took the form of little statues called “Baals” that represented things like the forces of nature. The people of the ancient near east worshipped these idols and made sacrifices to them in an attempt to harness those forces on their behalf. They worshipped from a place of fear, always anxious of what might happen if they didn’t get say the proper incantation or make the right sacrifice or do something that might displease the local god.

Listen to how the prophet Elijah describes it to Ahab when he confronts him in the midst of a deep drought. “It’s not I who has caused trouble in Israel but you and your government - you’ve dumped God’s ways and commands and run off after the local gods, the Baals.” (1 Kings 18:18 MSG) Rather than turning to God for help in the midst of a national crisis, Ahab turned to false gods. Rather than call on the Lord of the Universe to provide for His covenant people, Ahab turned to pagan idols. The result was predictable. Nothing. Nothing happened. Nothing changed. No help came. Why? Because Baal is not real. He is a concept, nothing more. A deification of the forces of nature. A human attempt at control. His idols are simply wood and stone. They have no power. They have no voice. They have no ability to hear and respond to our prayers. This is why Elijah mocks the prophets of Baal as they punish themselves to try and grab their god’s attention. He knows Baal cannot answer.

Why do we still chase after Baal? Sure, most of us don’t make little statues but we do make idols of money, time, power, success, significant others, sex, substances, or certain social/political ideologies. We worship them in an attempt to gain control in and through them over the forces of our world. It doesn’t seem to matter how much technological progress we make or how deep we probe the mysteries of this world, there is a pagan impulse within all of us that pushes us to worship creation rather than the Creator. And this, again, is where things go so very wrong in our world. The devastating impact of human idolatry is on display every day in the news or on social media. It’s brutal and terrifying and traumatic. How much better would this world be if we simply would turn to God? Submit our ways to Him? Obey His commands? Love as He loves? Serve as He serves? Give as He gives?

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 20-21

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June 22, 2023
Abuse of Power

Readings for today: 1 Kings 20-21 (audio reading)

At first glance, the story of Naboth's vineyard seems to not be a big deal. Not cast against the backdrop of the geopolitical scene in the Ancient Near East. It would seem that Ahab has much bigger fish to fry as he wrestles over his relationship with his neighbors. But the true intentions of our hearts are often revealed in how we handle the small challenges of life. On some level, it's easier to understand why Ahab makes the decision he makes regarding Ben-Hadad. He is doing his best to secure alliances to keep his kingdom safe. Now it's not the right decision. It certainly isn't God's will and he rightfully falls under judgment but I think we all can recognize the pressures he's under. But the episode with Naboth is petty and small and reveals the depths of the greed and selfishness that runs through Ahab's heart.

Ancestral land is a big deal in Israel. It traces all the way back to the original allotment given to each tribe and each family when Joshua divided the land. This is why Naboth resists the king when he asks for his vineyard. We're not just talking about a business transaction here. We're talking about transgressing the law of God who gave Naboth and his family the land in the first place. To relinquish his land to the king is to dishonor the gift of God. That's why he cannot accept the king's money or even the offer of a better vineyard. Jezebel obviously has no qualms about stealing the land. She was a pagan princess with no connection to the covenant relationship God has with Israel. She doesn't understand it much less respect it. She simply does what all those with power do. She takes what she wants when she wants it. She arranges a hit on Naboth and Ahab embraces the scheme thus cementing his doom and that of his family.

Now think about your own life. How have you responded to the pressures of trusting God when facing the big challenges of your life? Even more importantly, how do you trust God in the small things? The everyday decisions you have to make. The ordinary. The mundane. The seemingly insignificant. Nothing is insignificant in the eyes of God. All of life is sacred. Every decision is an opportunity to trust the Lord. Make sure you are honoring God today.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 22, 2 Chronicles 18-20

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June 24, 2023

Miracles

Readings for today: 2 Kings 1-4 (audio reading)

Today's reading is full of miracles. God healing the waters of Jericho. God filling up a dry land with pools of water. God creating a supply of never-ending oil. God raising a child from death. Miracles are hard for those of us raised with a scientific worldview to accept. We believe such phenomena need to be observable and repeatable or they can't have happened. We believe there must be some kind of natural explanation so we do all kinds of mental gymnastics trying to explain them away. Surely the water wasn't actually bad? Surely the water that filled the pools was a freak rain storm? Surely the woman just wasn't aware of how much oil she had? Surely the boy was just sick or unconscious or in a coma of some kind.

Miracles are by definition unrepeatable events. They are one-time occurrences where the Lord of the universe intervenes supernaturally in His creation. If one truly believes there is a God then one must conclude He is not bound by the same laws of nature He established that govern His creation. He is the Creator after all. Not a created being. He exists outside of time and space. He is truly free and unbounded. He is not subject to what He creates and therefore is able to act as He sees fit.

I have personally witnessed miracles in my life. I have many friends around the world who testify to miracles they have seen. I have seen God heal those who are sick. I have even witnessed a resurrection. These are awe-inspiring events that drive me to my knees before the Lord. They are humbling because of how they bring you face to face with the power of God. But I also know many who question God's miracles. They wonder why they haven't seen God act in such ways. They wonder why God performs miracles for some and not others. They sometimes reject miracles simply because they seem so arbitrary and unfair. Such thinking only exposes the poverty of our spiritual condition.

We don't deserve miracles. We don't earn miracles. We don't claim miracles. God is not a genie in a bottle who owes us three wishes. He cannot be manipulated or controlled or bound to our will. He is sovereign. He sees all of history and all of creation stretched out before Him all the time. He chooses to act as He wills to accomplish what is often a hidden purpose. Who are we to question His wisdom? Who are we to question His judgment? God never promises us life will be fair. He never promises to treat everyone the same. These are American ideals. Human ideals. And God is not bound to follow our limited understanding of justice. What does God promise? He promises to love us. He promises to be with us. He is faithful to us. He loves each of us with an everlasting love and that should be miracle enough for us.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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June 26, 2023
Loving our Enemies

Readings for today: 2 Kings 5:1-8:15 (audio reading)

The kingdom of Aram in the Bible was essentially a collection of city-states, the most prominent of which was Damascus. Though they never became an empire per se, their influence dominated the region. In fact, Aramaic will become the lingua franca of the area for centuries, extending even to the time of Jesus. Israel had a contentious relationship with Aram as we see in our passage today. There was conflict. There was war. The Aramaeans were their enemies. And yet the great prophet Elisha seems to have as much love for them as he does for his own people.

When the great general of Aram who surely had led armies against Israel came to him for help, Elisha healed him of his disease. When the armies of Aram surrounded Dothan in an attempt to capture and kill Elisha, he asked God to strike them blind and then led them to Samaria where he encouraged the king to throw a feast for them. When the king of Assyria fell sick, it was Elisha who went to visit him. These are strange acts for a holy man of God. Why in the world would he extend love and grace to Israel's enemies? Pagan idolators? A nation who caused so much suffering for his own people?

God loves the nations. God's desire is for the nations of the earth to come to saving faith in Him. The vision we get from the closing pages of Revelation is of the nations bringing their gifts to the New Jerusalem to offer them before the Lord. The leaves of the trees in the eternal city are for the healing of the nations. This has always been God's heart. It's why He sends the nations prophets like Elisha and Jonah in the Old Testament and it's why He sends the nations His church in the New Testament. God looks forward to a time when all wars will cease. All weapons will be beaten into instruments of peace. All enemies will dwell in peace together. Listen to how the prophet Isaiah puts it, "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." (Isaiah 11:6-9 ESV)

It's a beautiful picture and when we pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, we are asking God to bring His vision to pass in our time. In our world. In our community. In our relationships. In our lives. Jesus is the greater Elisha and as such, shows us how to love our enemies. From the cross, He asks for our forgiveness. Through His suffering, death, and resurrection, He tears down the dividing wall of hostility that exists between us. While we were still at war with Him, He laid down His life for us and He calls all who follow Him to do the same. How can you respond to this call today? Who do you need to reach out with love and grace?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 8:16-29, 2 Chronicles 21:1-22:9

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June 27, 2023
Role Models

Readings for today: 2 Kings 8:16-29, 2 Chronicles 21:1-22:9 (audio reading)

One of the main reasons I try to change versions and/or translations each year when I read through the Bible is get a fresh read on the text. It keeps it from becoming rote or boring. For example, this year I've chosen to read using the Message version. Admittedly, it's not word for word or even phrase by phrase. It's a paraphrase which means the translator is doing their best to translate the original language into modern idioms that we can better understand.

For example, look at how 2 Chronicles 22:4 is translated...“After the death of his father, Ahaziah attended the sin school of Ahab, and graduated with a degree in doom.” Isn't that good? It helps us understand why God was growing so angry with the kings of Judah. They were abandoning His laws and His ways and were choosing to follow the pagan ways of their northern cousins. The “sin school of Ahab” must have been very enticing. After all, Ahab ruled the northern kingdom of Israel for over twenty years. He was a successful warlord who won several victories that strengthened his kingdom. He made alliances through marriage with powerful city-states. His own father admired Ahab so much, he had started to imitate him and even married into Ahab's family. So it must have felt very natural for Ahaziah to look to his older cousin as an example. Sadly, he couldn't have chosen a worse role model.

How often do we make the same mistake in our lives? How often do we choose the popular, the rich, the powerful, the influential to imitate rather than people of character? Isn't this one of the main problems we have in politics right now? A recent poll found that a majority of Americans across both parties believe our political system and political leaders are corrupt. It make sense when our airwaves and newsfeeds are filled with stories about laptops, classified documents, ethics violations, double-standards, tax evasion, violent rhetoric, hate speech, etc. It is further confirmed by the number of political leaders whose personal wealth increases dramatically while they are in office. And yet each election seems to be a race to the bottom when it comes to character. We jettison principle in favor of power. We excuse the egregious sins of our candidate as the “lesser of two evils.” It's a brutal, Darwinian system that simply isn't sustainable. Like Ahaziah, our leaders have gone to “sin school” and “graduated with a degree in doom.” It cannot end well.

There is a better way. It requires us to relinquish our obsession with power and instead look to men and women of godly character to lead us and set an example for us. This starts in our own personal lives with the role models we choose. Are we choosing men and women who fear the Lord? Who walk in wisdom? Who love others unconditionally? The next step is to think about the leaders we lift up in business, education, healthcare, churches, and the non-profit world. Are we choosing leaders who place the welfare of others before their own? Do we give the right voices airtime? Are we celebrating the right people for the right kind of success? Finally, we have to reconsider the way we elect our political leaders. Are we choosing men and women who have a heart to serve rather than be served? Are we looking for humility over arrogance? Respect over contempt? True patriots over those who are out for themselves? God honors those who seek to honor Him. The only role models worth following are those who put God first in their lives.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 9-11, 2 Chronicles 22:10-12, 23

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June 28, 2023

Judgment

Readings for today: 2 Kings 9-11, 2 Chronicles 22:10-12, 23 (audio reading)

Today's reading is harsh, brutal, and terrifying. How can we begin to get our minds around the judgment we see in this passage? First of all, we have to remember God's commitment to work through human beings to bring about His sovereign will. Justice in the ancient near east was a communal affair. It involved not only the person who committed the crimes but their entire families. It included those who supported them. Everyone connected with the former regime was hunted down and put to death. So when God calls Jehu to execute justice on the entire line of Ahab, the impact ripples out to every man, woman, and child connected to them.

I know it's hard to get our minds around the blood and violence. It's hard to understand how this could be fair and just and righteous in God's eyes. How could a good God allow such unrestrained violence in His name? Once again we have to take a step back and remember that though the Bible was written for us, it was not written to us. What happens in today's passage would have made perfect sense to the people living in ancient Israel at the time. They would have perceived it to be fair and just and righteous according to the cultural standards of their day. And while we may struggle to understand why they made the choices they did, it should cause us to reflect on the justice systems of our own day and age. What will future generations say about us three thousand years from now?

Once we take a step back from all the blood and gore, we can begin to understand and see the greater purposes of God. He alone has the right to judge. He alone has the right to execute justice on the earth. The line of Ahab got what they rightfully deserved after generations of false worship and murder and theft and corruption. God proved faithful to His promise to avenge the death of Naboth and his family. He proved faithful to His promise to bring an end to the pagan ways of Jezebel. And their lives serve as a warning to us. Unless we turn from our sin and place our faith in Jesus Christ, we too will come under the judgment of God. Only the blood of Jesus Christ shed on our behalf can satisfy the justice of God. May we humble ourselves before Him, confess our sin, and call on the One who is "faithful and just" to "cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:8-9)

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 12-13, 2 Chronicles 24

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June 29, 2023
Covenant Faithfulness

Readings for today: 2 Kings 12-13, 2 Chronicles 24 (audio reading)

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 and Sarah to give them a son and make Abraham the “father of many nations.” He made a promise to Isaac and Rebekah and to Jacob and Leah and Rachel to make their family a people He would call His very own. He made a promise to Moses 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 give him 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 is justified in taking 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 carried the full weight of God’s righteous judgment of 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 those around us? This same love to those who find themselves lost and lonely? How can we be merciful to others 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 darkest 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 give us the strength to do this and the good news is He promises to do 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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June 30, 2023
High Places

Readings for today: 2 Kings 14-15, 2 Chronicles 25-27 (audio reading)

High places. We see them pop up all over the place in the Kings and Chronicles. (In fact, the picture for today's blog is a "high place" from Petra that I climbed to when I was there last summer.) 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 forbade 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 worshipped false 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Jonah 1-4

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