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August 1, 2023
The End

Readings for today: [Isaiah 64-66](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

I meet people all the time who are asking the question, “Is this all there is?” Is this world all there is? Is this life all there is? Are the 70, 80, 90 years of life all I get? And to what end? I spend my life working hard to provide for myself and my family. I achieve some measure of success. I do my best to stay active and healthy. I enjoy some wonderful experiences along the way. My wedding. The birth of my children and grandchildren. Certain milestones or achievements that hopefully leave the world a better place. But then what? Is all I have to look forward to in retirement a slow, steady decline? Or perhaps a tragic diagnosis that robs me of what little strength I have left? Will my mind start to fail along with my body? Will I be missed after I’m gone? These are real, honest questions asked by many thoughtful people I’ve had the privilege of walking beside as a pastor over the years.

Thankfully, the Lord doesn’t leave us guessing. He doesn’t leave us groping about in the dark for answers. He tells us exactly what’s going to happen. He lets us in on the end of the story. Listen to how Isaiah puts it, “I’m creating new heavens and a new earth. All the earlier troubles, chaos, and pain are things of the past, to be forgotten. Look ahead with joy. Anticipate what I’m creating: I’ll create Jerusalem as sheer joy, create my people as pure delight. I’ll take joy in Jerusalem, take delight in my people: No more sounds of weeping in the city, no cries of anguish; No more babies dying in the cradle, or old people who don’t enjoy a full lifetime; One-hundredth birthdays will be considered normal— anything less will seem like a cheat. They’ll build houses and move in. They’ll plant fields and eat what they grow. No more building a house that some outsider takes over, No more planting fields that some enemy confiscates, For my people will be as long-lived as trees, my chosen ones will have satisfaction in their work. They won’t work and have nothing come of it, they won’t have children snatched out from under them. For they themselves are plantings blessed by God, with their children and grandchildren likewise God-blessed. Before they call out, I’ll answer. Before they’ve finished speaking, I’ll have heard. Wolf and lamb will graze the same meadow, lion and ox eat straw from the same trough, but snakes—they’ll get a diet of dirt! Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill anywhere on my Holy Mountain,” says God.” (Isaiah 65:17-25 MSG)

It’s a beautiful picture of the life to come. A life not lived in some vaporous, ephemeral, spiritual existence but one that is physical and tangible and as real as it gets. God is going to renew the heavens and the earth. The heavenly dimension where He lives and reigns will eventually absorb this world and all that is in it. Life as we know it will be transformed. All that is wrong about this world will be set right. Every injustice will be addressed. Every hurt will be healed. Every tear will be wiped away. Every grief will be comforted. Every pain erased. Death will be no more. Sin will be no more. Evil will be no more. God Himself will rule and reign over a renewed creation and a renewed people as He originally intended. This is the end of all things. This is the telos of all things. This is where all of history is headed.

So here’s our challenge. Living with God’s end in mind. Living today for the world tomorrow. Trusting God for the future even as we labor in the present. Believing that every thought, every word, every action carries eternal weight because of what God has done and what God will do. Simply put, heaven is the answer to our deepest questions. Heaven is the satisfaction for our deepest longings. Heaven gives meaning and purpose to every moment of our lives. We are called to live as citizens of heaven in a world full of death. Our lives to be light in a world full of darkness.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 21, 2 Chronicles 33

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August 2, 2023
Rationality of Evil

Readings for today: 2 Kings 21, 2 Chronicles 33 ([audio reading](#))

No one sets out to be evil. No one wakes up in the morning thinking to themselves, “How many bad things can I get away with today?” No parent raises their child to love evil. No child sets out to stick it to their parents by becoming as evil as possible. No one starts out loving evil and no one makes evil their life goal. So why then is evil so prevalent in our world today?

Evil is what happens when we set our hearts on something other than God. As soon as we displace God in our hearts, evil becomes far more rational. For example, as soon as I set my heart on loving someone other than my wife, adultery becomes rational. As soon as I set my heart on achieving some position or some promotion, lying about other candidates becomes rational. As soon as I set my heart on wealth, greed becomes rational. As soon as I set my heart on political power, corruption becomes rational. With me so far? Any time we set our sights on something lower than God. Something lesser than God. Something other than God, we are opening the door to evil. When we set our hearts and minds on God, we naturally follow God’s will because we know it is the only way to arrive at God’s purpose for our lives. To pursue any other end. To chase any other dream. To set any other goal means we must find another way. We must take another path. We walk a different road. And that road - by definition - leads to sin and evil and death.

Consider the case of Manasseh. A young man raised by a godly king in the lap of luxury in Jerusalem. He became king at the very young age of twelve. He reigned for over fifty years. And during that time, he engaged in all manner of evil. Why? Why would a young man, raised on the stories of his faithful father and the miracles God had wrought, turn to idolatry? Perhaps he could sense the coming demise of his own kingdom. Perhaps he looked around at some of the other nations and coveted their power and wealth. Perhaps he wanted to fit in. Perhaps he wanted to be esteemed in the eyes of his royal peers. After all, his father had this fatal flaw, right? Showed the Babylonian envoys all his wealth in order to impress them? Whatever it was, I seriously doubt Manasseh got up one day after being crowned king and did a U-turn. I doubt he set out to do evil. I doubt he thought to himself, “How can I become the most evil king in Israelite history?” Again, no one sets out to do evil. Evil is what happens when you’re on your way to somewhere else.

So where is your life headed? What are your life goals? If someone were to challenge you at whatever stage of life you find yourself in to write them down, where would God fall on your list? Seriously. Be honest with yourself. No sense in hiding. It’s not like God doesn’t already know. If someone were to look at your calendar. Look at your checking account. Look at your social media feed. Look at the way you vote and the causes you advocate for and why you advocate for them. If they were to interview your spouse. Your children. Your close friends. What would they find? What would these sources reveal? Would they show a strong commitment to the Lord or would they tell a different tale? Remember, “evil” is defined by God as putting anything before Him in your life. It’s not just a term reserved for the Hitlers of our world. So where do you stand? If you find yourself on the “evil” side of the ledger, don’t lose heart. Manasseh repented and God answered his prayer. Trust me when I say God will answer your prayer as well if you but turn to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Nahum 1-3

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August 3, 2023
The Judge of Nations

Readings for today: Nahum 1-3 (audio reading)

Every day I try to read the news. I scan the headlines from the BBC to CNN to FoxNews. I read the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times. I keep up with breaking news on Twitter. It's not easy. The headlines are often heartbreaking. Most of the time, I have to wade through all sorts of disinformation. Truth is in scarce supply these days. Not only that but every single article seems to cry out, "there is no god!" After all, how could a righteous God allow such political corruption to exist? How could a good God allow such human suffering? How could a just God allow tyrants to sit on thrones? How could compassionate God allow things like life-threatening poverty while others live in luxury? If I dwell on these things too long, I start to lose hope. The forces arrayed against the righteous in this world seem so strong and my faith is so weak. That's why reading a book like Nahum is so important.

In Nahum's day, Assyria was the dominant world power. She had conquered the nations around her with absolute ruthlessness and cruelty. Just over one hundred years prior to Nahum's prophecy, Assyria had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel, literally wiping her from the map. Jonah had been sent to Nineveh about 15 years after the destruction of Israel to preach revival but the fires his preaching kindled had clearly gone out. Assyria was back on the warpath. As she rampaged through the Middle East, it must have been hard not to be afraid. It must have been challenging to maintain faith. It probably felt like the future was bleak at best. After all, Assyria had no rivals left. No one powerful enough to check her power.

Nahum, however, is not fooled. He knows God reigns sovereign over the nations. He knows God rules the world with justice. He knows God will bring His righteous judgment in due time. I love how Nahum puts it, "God's orders on Nineveh: You're the end of the line. It's all over with Nineveh. I'm gutting your temple. Your gods and goddesses go in the trash. I'm digging your grave. It's an unmarked grave. You're nothing—no, you're less than nothing!" Look! Striding across the mountains— a messenger bringing the latest good news: peace! A holiday, Judah! Celebrate! Worship and recommit to God! No more worries about this enemy. This one is history. Close the book." (Nahum 1:14-15 MSG) What a great reminder that God is in control. No matter how bleak things may seem, God is at work to bring about His will. He simply will not let this world go. He loves it - and He loves us - far too much to walk away.

As you engage the world around you, don't give into fear. Don't let despair set in. God is still in charge after all these years and God will bring His will and His way to pass. Our job is simply to trust.

Readings for tomorrow: Zephaniah 1-3

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August 4, 2023
Humility

Readings for today: Zephaniah 1-3 (audio reading)

I once met a man who gave up a six figure income here in the US to return to his native country where he did not draw a salary for three straight years. He went from being in the top 1% of the world's wealthiest people to the bottom 1% of the world's poor. He gave up security and safety to live in danger and place his family at risk. He gave up power and influence and privilege in one of the world's most significant NGO's to work among those who have been forgotten. When I expressed my admiration for such a sacrifice, his response was confusion. "What sacrifice?" he said. "My life is not my own. My life has never been my own. My life is in the hands of God to do with as He wills." This, friends, is true humility and it's what Zephaniah talks about in our passage for today. "I'll leave a core of people among you who are poor in spirit - what's life of Israel that's really Israel. They'll make their home in God." (Zephaniah 3:12 MSG) It is hard to overstate the importance of humility to the Christian faith. Humility is what keeps us grounded before the Lord. Humility is what keeps us dependent on Him. Humility is what opens our hands and our hearts, allowing us to release the things in which we too often place our trust. Wealth. Health. Power. Privilege. Status. Authority. Pride. We are fools to place our trust in these things and yet it is so hard to resist temptation. We who have so much actually fall prey to our own desires. Our ability to gratify those desires instantaneously only serves to tighten our bonds. Thinking we are free, we choose to become slaves and there's nothing more pitiful than a free man or woman choosing to remain in bondage. Nothing more heartbreaking than sitting in a cell with the door wide open, refusing to leave. This is the state we find ourselves in today. Our culture has made Self a "god" and the result is entitlement. Narcissism. Selfishness. Greed. Self-protection. And far too many of us worship at this altar.

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

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

Now all this may sound scary. Frightening if this has not been your path. Here's the good news. God doesn't ask for blind obedience. He doesn't require us to step into the great unknown. He gives this

promise to all who walk humbly before Him...“Don’t be afraid. Dear Zion, don’t despair. Your God is present among you, a strong Warrior there to save you. Happy to have you back, He’ll calm you with His love and delight you with His songs.” (Zephaniah 3:16-17 MSG) God can be trusted. God is true to His Word. His faithfulness never ends. His love never fails. Simply believe and let God take you by the hand today.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 22-23, 2 Chronicles 34-35

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August 5, 2023
This is the Way

Readings for today: 2 Kings 22-23, 2 Chronicles 34-35 (audio reading)

“This is the way.” When Star Wars fans hear this phrase, they immediately think of the Mandalorian. When Christians hear this phrase, they most likely think of Jesus. In John 14:6, Jesus says, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but through Me.” Throughout the Gospels, Jesus makes it clear that He isn’t just preaching to the head or to the heart but to the whole person. He is offering not just another ethical system or abstract philosophy or a different take on theology. What He is offering is a radical shift in how “live, move, and have our being” in this world. This is nothing new by the way. It’s actually been God’s plan all along. Ever since He delivered them out of slavery in Egypt, God has set His people apart. He calls them to a different way of believing, a different way of feeling, a different way of acting, and ultimately, a different way of living.

Consider what we just read today about King Josiah. Here’s a man who loves God with all His heart but he is the descendent of many rulers in Israel who wanted to live just like the nations around them. This is why we see so many different altars to so many different gods in the different towns, villages, and cities of Judah. They have compromised their faith. They have syncretized their belief systems with those of the pagan tribes and nations around them. It wasn’t that they stopped worshipping Yahweh, they simply layered in the worship of additional gods and goddesses along the way. In so doing, they lost their distinctiveness. They lost their exceptionalism. They broke faith with the covenant their ancestors had once made. Even at a young age, Josiah discerns the truth. He sees their divided hearts. He understands the judgment that is coming. And he does everything humanly possible to turn the tide. To bring God’s people back to true worship and a right relationship with Him. Tragically, it’s not enough.

Over the years, I’ve had the privilege of working with many different churches, many of which were struggling for survival. I’ve had the privilege of working with many different pastors, many of whom were discouraged and defeated. I’ve had the privilege of working with many different lay leaders, many of whom were anxious and afraid and worried about the future. All of them believe in the Truth of Jesus. All of them have tasted the Life of Jesus. Most of them, however, do not follow the Way of Jesus. They do not trust His ways over their own ways. His thoughts over their own thoughts. His wisdom over their own wisdom. They believe the Way Jesus went about His ministry is obsolete. Irrelevant in today’s world. Instead, they seek guidance from the current cultural trends. They seek comfort in the traditions of their past. They seek to adopt the best business and organizational leadership models of the world. Sadly, the results speak for themselves. Almost 40% of pastors expressing a desire to quit ministry. A significant percentage of church leaders crashing and burning due to moral failure. 80% - by some estimates - of churches plateaued and/or declining. A significant number of churches paralyzed by conflict or the inability to manage complex change. Church attendance dropping each year at an alarming rate. The rapid rise of the “nones” and/or the “deconstruction” movement due to the prevalence of abuse (spiritually, relationally, sexually, etc.), disappointment, discouragement, frustration, and a host of other factors. Without a doubt, the church in the West is experiencing significant decline across the board and most of it is due - in my estimation - to the fact that we continue to take the Way of Jesus seriously enough to orient our entire budget, programming, worship, and mission accordingly.

Imagine what could happen if pastors understood their primary role as discipling their elders. Their “12” as it were. Imagine if board meetings were oriented around prayer and the study of God’s Word

and the intentional seeking of the will of God. Imagine a church's life built around mutual sacrifice rather than catering to generational and/or cultural preferences. Imagine a church creative enough to mine the depth and breadth of the Christian tradition for any number of spiritual practices to help people grow in their relationship with Christ. Imagine a church who sought Christ with their whole heart, mind, and strength. This is what our world so desperately needs and it is what God promises to honor if we will simply submit our ways to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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August 7, 2023
Reading the Bible Cross-Culturally

Readings for today: Habakkuk 1-3 (audio reading)

I am sitting in the United Club in Washington/Dulles, waiting for my next flight which will take me to the Horn of Africa. My youngest daughter is with me. Our trip is long. Many hours over many flights to get where we are going. Eventually, we will fly on a Mission Aviation Fellowship plane and land on a dirt runway in a rural area where we will spend the week. No showers. No A/C. Little food. It is going to be a challenging experience but also a rewarding experience. I can't wait.

We're crossing a lot of barriers to get here. Geographic barriers like oceans and continents. Political barriers as we fly in and out of different countries. Economic barriers as the people we will serve are among the poorest in the world. Cultural barriers like language, dress, and other customs. The area where we are going is located in a nation where the rule of law has yet to be fully established. Infrastructure is almost non-existent. Traveling by road is dangerous and uncertain so we fly our team and our supplies in. We are working with some of the most courageous Christians I have ever met. They endure all sorts of hardship and persecution in order to spread the good news of the gospel among their people. It's a privilege to support and resource them.

When I think of some of the people I know who live in this particular region, I am struck by how much closer they are culturally to the Scriptures. Verses like the ones we read today in Habakkuk are not philosophical abstractions for them. They live these verses. They pray these verses. They preach these verses. Consider these words from Habakkuk 1:1-4 MSG, "God, how long do I have to cry out for help before you listen? How many times do I have to yell, "Help! Murder! Police!" before you come to the rescue? Why do you force me to look at evil, stare trouble in the face day after day? Anarchy and violence break out, quarrels and fights all over the place. Law and order fall to pieces. Justice is a joke. The wicked have the righteous hamstrung and stand justice on its head." This is their lived experience. They know what it's like to stare evil in the face day after day. They know what it's like to see anarchy and violence break out as roving gangs from rival tribes burn and pillage their way through their towns and villages. The leader of their country is as corrupt as they come. He stands justice on its head with regularity. Day by day, they cry out to God. How long? How long before you come to our help?

They also walk by faith. They claim the promises of Habakkuk as their own. Through drought and famine and persecution and tribal warfare, they cling to the hope they have in Christ. The sure and certain knowledge that God's rule will prevail. Listen to how Habakkuk describes it... "Though the cherry trees don't blossom and the strawberries don't ripen, Though the apples are worm-eaten and the wheat fields stunted, Though the sheep pens are sheepless and the cattle barns empty, I'm singing joyful praise to God. I'm turning cartwheels of joy to my Savior God. Counting on God's Rule to prevail, I take heart and gain strength. I run like a deer. I feel like I'm king of the mountain!" (Habakkuk 3:17-19 MSG) I don't know about you but it's hard for me to reconcile these verses with my life. I am blessed beyond measure. I am wealthy beyond measure. I am rich beyond measure. I've never known life-threatening hunger or water-borne disease or lawlessness. So it's hard to put myself in the shoes of those I will serve this week. That's why I come. I want to learn. I want to grow. I want to see the world through their eyes. I want to read the Bible through their eyes. I want to see Christ through their eyes so I may draw ever closer to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Joel 1-3

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August 8, 2023
Revival

Readings for today: Joel 1-3 (audio reading)

Joel is one of my favorite books of the Old Testament mainly because of the clarity with which it teaches when it comes to revival. There is a lot of talk in the church today about revival. A lot of prayers ascending to God, asking for revival and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We want God to awaken the slumbering hearts of God's people across our great land and heal our nation. Why then does revival not come? Why does our culture continue its rapid descent into chaos? Why is there such a rise in hate and anger and rage? Why is God not answering our prayers?

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

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

"Listen up you priests, put on your robes and join the outcry. You who lead people in worship, lead them in lament. Spend the night dressed in gunnysacks, you servants of my God. Nothing's going on in the place of worship, no offerings, no prayers—nothing. Declare a holy fast, call a special meeting, get the leaders together, Round up everyone in the country. Get them into God's Sanctuary for serious prayer to God." (Joel 1:13-14 MSG)

"But there's also this, it's not too late— God's personal Message!— "Come back to me and really mean it! Come fasting and weeping, sorry for your sins!" Change your life, not just your clothes. Come back to God, your God. And here's why: God is kind and merciful. He takes a deep breath, puts up with a lot, This most patient God, extravagant in love, always ready to cancel catastrophe. Who knows? Maybe he'll do it now, maybe he'll turn around and show pity. Maybe, when all's said and done, there'll be blessings full and robust for your God!" (Joel 2:12-14 MSG)

"Blow the ram's horn trumpet in Zion! Declare a day of repentance, a holy fast day. Call a public meeting. Get everyone there. Consecrate the congregation. Make sure the elders come, but bring in the children, too, even the nursing babies, Even men and women on their honeymoon— interrupt them and get them there. Between Sanctuary entrance and altar, let the priests, God's servants, weep tears of repentance. Let them intercede: "Have mercy, God, on your people! Don't abandon your heritage to contempt. Don't let the pagans take over and rule them and sneer, 'And so where is this God of theirs?" (Joel 2:15-17 MSG)

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

“Children of Zion, celebrate! Be glad in your God. He’s giving you a teacher to train you how to live right— Teaching, like rain out of heaven, showers of words to refresh and nourish your soul, just as he used to do. And plenty of food for your body—silos full of grain, casks of wine and barrels of olive oil. I’ll make up for the years of the locust, the great locust devastation— Locusts savage, locusts deadly, fierce locusts, locusts of doom, That great locust invasion I sent your way. You’ll eat your fill of good food. You’ll be full of praises to your God, The God who has set you back on your heels in wonder. Never again will my people be despised. You’ll know without question that I’m in the thick of life with Israel, That I’m your God, yes, your God, the one and only real God. Never again will my people be despised.” (Joel 2:23-27 MSG)

“I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people: Your sons will prophesy, also your daughters. Your old men will dream, your young men will see visions. I’ll even pour out my Spirit on the servants, men and women both. I’ll set wonders in the sky above and signs on the earth below...” (Joel 2:28 MSG)

The answer we keep avoiding is simply this...surrender. Relinquishment. Submission. Surrender to God’s will and God’s ways and most importantly, God’s love. Until we do this, we will not see revival come. Repentance is the precondition to revival. Surrender is the precondition to the pouring out of God’s Spirit. We cannot receive from God until we open our hearts and unclench our fists. And this is a process. It’s not something that happens easily. It is a daily decision we make to place ourselves before the Lord.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 1-4

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August 9, 2023
The Grief of God

Readings for today: Jeremiah 1-4 (audio reading)

Jeremiah is a hard book to read. Especially if one gets in touch with the pain present throughout. Not only Jeremiah's pain as he watches his people and his nation struggle and suffer and eventually be destroyed, but God's pain as well as His people betray Him by chasing after other gods. So intertwined is the pain of God with His prophet that it is often hard to know who's speaking. For example, Jeremiah 4:19 says, "'I'm doubled up with cramps in my belly— a poker burns in my gut. My insides are tearing me up, never a moment's peace. The ram's horn trumpet blast rings in my ears, the signal for all-out war.'" (Jeremiah 4:19 MSG) Traditionally, these words have been ascribed to Jeremiah himself because we simply cannot fathom God saying such things. However, when one looks closely at the text, it just as possible that God is speaking. I know this is probably a challenging thought but could it possible that we are so uncomfortable with the idea that God might feel pain that we automatically bracket this reading out of the text?

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 5-8

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August 10, 2023
An Emotional God

Readings for today: Jeremiah 5-8 (audio reading)

"I drown in grief. I'm heartsick. Oh, listen! Please listen! It's the cry of my dear people reverberating through the country. Is God no longer in Zion? Has the King gone away? Can you tell me why they flaunt their plaything-gods, their silly, imported no-gods before me? The crops are in, the summer is over, but for us nothing's changed. We're still waiting to be rescued. For my dear broken people, I'm heartbroken. I weep, seized by grief. Are there no healing ointments in Gilead? Isn't there a doctor in the house? So why can't something be done to heal and save my dear, dear people?" (Jeremiah 8:18-22 MSG)

This 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 Greek Platonic thought whether we realize it or not. We tend to believe God is fundamentally distant. Fundamentally different. Fundamentally beyond all human experience, including emotions. We believe He is untouchable. Unmovable. Unchangeable. We associate emotions with feelings of change. Instability. Unpredictability. And these things cannot be true of God...right?

But what if we were willing to embrace a different understanding of emotions? A deeper understanding? Again, it is without question that God experiences emotions. Love. Anger. Frustration. Joy. We read about them over and over again and they are not simply anthropomorphisms. (A way for God to express Himself in human terms we can understand. Ex. "The arm of the Lord...") What if our understanding of God could be expanded to include the full range of emotions? What if us having emotions is part of being made in God's image? What if our "emotionalism", which breeds the feelings of instability and unpredictability, is actually a result of sin and 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 the passage cited above. God is expressing the deepest, most heartbreaking grief possible. "I drown in grief. I'm heartsick." God is experiencing an incredible sense of loss. His people have betrayed Him. They have abandoned Him. They have turned around and blamed Him. "It's the cry of my dear people reverberating through the country. Is God no longer in Zion? Has the King gone away?" 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. "Can you tell me why they flaunt their plaything-gods, their silly, imported no-gods before me?" 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 crops are in, the summer is over, but for us nothing's changed. We're still waiting to be rescued."

The perspective shifts back to God at the beginning of chapter nine which we'll read tomorrow. (Remember the chapter and verse divisions are somewhat arbitrary and appeared much later than the original text.) "'I wish my head were a well of water and my eyes fountains of tears So I could weep day and night for casualties among my dear, dear people. At times I wish I had a wilderness hut, a backwoods cabin, Where I could get away from my people and never see them again. They're a faithless, feckless bunch, a congregation of degenerates.'" (Jeremiah 9:1-2 MSG) Again, one pictures

deep, heavy sobs. God weeping a flood of tears. God experiencing unimaginable pain. Because He has freely joined Himself in an unbreakable covenant with His people, their wounds become His wounds. Their pain becomes His pain. Their heartbreak becomes His heartbreak. Things get so bad, God wishes He could leave. Abandon them to their fate. Leave the Temple in Jerusalem and return to the wilderness. To the time when He tabernacled with them on the Exodus journey. But the Tabernacle is gone. There is no lodging place in the desert God can run to. He is stuck. He is committed. He will endure. This is the great faithfulness of our God! It is costly. It is hard. It is painful. But it remains true.

Really, God is being faithful to Himself here. Faithful to the promise He has made. To be our God, come hell or high water. This was the 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, someday there will come a day when God will finally lose patience and abandon us. God will not leave us or forsake us for in doing so He would be unfaithful to Himself. Let this truth be your firm foundation today, friends!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 9-12

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August 11, 2023
Eternal Security

Readings for today: Jeremiah 9-12 (audio reading)

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. Though I was never the most athletic, I lettered in two sports and made the all-state team in lacrosse. Though 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...“Don't let the wise brag of their wisdom. Don't let heroes brag of their exploits. Don't let the rich brag of their riches. If you brag, brag of this and this only: That you understand and know me. I'm God, and I act in loyal love. I do what's right and set things right and fair, and delight in those who do the same things. These are my trademarks.” (Jeremiah 9:23-24 MSG) 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 than 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 13-16

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August 12, 2023
God's People

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

“Just as shorts clothe and protect, so I kept the whole family of Israel under my care”—God’s Decree—
“so that everyone could see they were my people, a people I could show off to the world and be proud
of. But they refused to do a thing I said.” (Jeremiah 13:8-11 MSG)

It’s a weird scene. God tells Jeremiah to buy a loincloth. Wear it. Bury it. Dig it up. All in an effort to illustrate for His relationship with Israel. I don’t know about you but I feel for these prophets. They are often called to do the strangest of things. I often wonder what their friends and family thought of them. I wonder what kind of ridicule and abuse they suffered. How isolated and alone they must have felt. I think of John the Baptist who was described as the “lone voice crying in the wilderness.” It had to be such a hard life. At the same time, I love the message God sends through Jeremiah. The picture of God clinging to us like an undergarment. Clinging to us in the most intimate of places. Clinging to us and never letting go. Why would God do such a thing? Especially when His people harden their hearts and refuse to listen?

God has a plan for your life. How many times have you heard that message? It’s true! From the beginning, God has made His plan clear. Humanity’s purpose is to fill the earth with the glory of God. Fill the earth with the image of God. Fill the earth with the praise of God. This is why God made us in the first place. This is the condition Adam and Eve were born into in the Garden of Eden. This is what all of us will one day experience when heaven comes to earth. No matter what we do or where we go or how much we sin, God’s plan never changes. He never relents from His purposes. He never stops working to bring about His will in our lives. Though we may resist Him. Though we may run from Him. Though we may rebel against Him. God refuses to let go. His grip remains tight. His love steadfast and true.

I think of when my children were younger. How I would scoop them up in my arms at times and try to hold them close. Sometimes they would arch their backs and try to wiggle from my grasp. Sometimes they would fight me and try to push me away. But in the end they always laid their head down on my shoulder and snuggled in close. I think of the teenagers I live with and how upset they get at times. They yell. They cry. They say hurtful things. One of the things I’ve learned is not to fight them but simply hold out my arms. Wait for their emotions to calm down and give them a big hug. Then we talk things out. I think God is like that.

If you are a Christian, you are part of God’s people. You have been given His name. You were created for His praise and glory. You are not insignificant. You are not worthless. You are not hopeless. You are not lost. You are not alone. You are not on your own. God is with you. He clings to you even now. He is as close as a loincloth around your waist. Engaged in the most intimate spaces of your life. Stop running. Stop resisting. Stop fighting. Turn and embrace the One who loves you more than you can ever know. Cling to God even as He clings to you.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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August 14, 2023
Life with God

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

Life with God can be a roller coaster. It's not always unicorns and rainbows and bubbles and sunshine. It's not always a mountaintop spiritual experience. It's not always positive and encouraging. Sometimes it's painful and hard. Sometimes confusing and complex. Sometimes depressingly difficult. That's what I love most about Jeremiah. He doesn't hold back at all with God. He's honest and transparent. He's unafraid to come before God as he is, warts and all. Listen especially to his words from Jeremiah 20:7-18 (MSG)...

"You pushed me into this, God, and I let you do it. You were too much for me. And now I'm a public joke. They all poke fun at me. Every time I open my mouth I'm shouting, "Murder!" or "Rape!" And all I get for my God-warnings are insults and contempt..." Jeremiah has been whipped and beaten and imprisoned for preaching God's Word to His people. He has been abused and mistreated and oppressed. It's not fair. It's not just. It's not okay. And Jeremiah lays the blame at God's feet.

At the same time, Jeremiah knows he cannot quit. He cannot help himself. If he tries to walk away from his calling, he will regret it. The pressure builds deep in his gut. There's a burning in his bones. He simply cannot turn a blind eye to all the sin and injustice he sees on display. "But if I say, "Forget it! No more God-Messages from me!" The words are fire in my belly, a burning in my bones. I'm worn out trying to hold it in. I can't do it any longer! Then I hear whispering behind my back: "There goes old 'Danger-Everywhere.' Shut him up! Report him!" Old friends watch, hoping I'll fall flat on my face: "One misstep and we'll have him. We'll get rid of him for good!"

Throughout his struggles, his faith in God endures. His trust in God never seems to waver. Despite the ups and downs, Jeremiah continues to place his hope in the God who fights at his side. He knows God isn't sending him into these battles alone. "But God, a most fierce warrior, is at my side. Those who are after me will be sent sprawling— Slapstick buffoons falling all over themselves, a spectacle of humiliation no one will ever forget. Oh, God-of-the-Angel-Armies, no one fools you. You see through everyone, everything. I want to see you pay them back for what they've done. I rest my case with you. Sing to God! All praise to God! He saves the weak from the grip of the wicked."

It's been my experience that faith and doubt often go together. Deep trust and hard questions can co-exist. Praise and pain are part and parcel of the Christian life. As much as Jeremiah looks to God and praises Him amidst all the challenges he faces, he also wishes with all his heart that he didn't have to go through these trials. "Curse the day I was born! The day my mother bore me— a curse on it, I say! And curse the man who delivered the news to my father: "You've got a new baby—a boy baby!" (How happy it made him.) Let that birth notice be blacked out, deleted from the records, And the man who brought it haunted to his death with the bad news he brought. He should have killed me before I was born, with that womb as my tomb, My mother pregnant for the rest of her life with a baby dead in her womb. Why, oh why, did I ever leave that womb? Life's been nothing but trouble and tears, and what's coming is more of the same."

I hope today's reading is as encouraging for you as it is for me. There are so many pressures, particularly in the American church today, to pretend like everything's okay. We have a hard time expressing our deepest, most heartbreaking emotions or asking our most difficult questions. Somewhere along the way, we convinced ourselves that sharing these things somehow reflected a lack

of faith when, in fact, the opposite is true. Life with God is not always up and to the right. It's not always positive. Not every prayer gets answered in the way we want. Not every act of obedience will result in praise from those around us or material blessings in this world. This is probably one of the biggest lessons I learn from my brothers and sisters who practice their faith in the developing world. Their lives are full of immense hardship and suffering and persecution and yet, they cling to God. May we have the courage to do the same.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 21-24

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August 15, 2023
False Prophets

Readings for today: Jeremiah 21-24 ([audio reading](#))

One of the things that makes my job more difficult is the popularity of so many false prophets in our world today. The internet is replete with them. Social media amplifies their voices to unprecedented heights. Their platforms are enormous and cut across all kinds of different demographics. I spend a lot of time sitting down with people I know and love and serve helping them discern whether or not the message they've heard from this prophet or that preacher or that person claiming to hear from God is actually true or not. Tragically, most of it is nonsense. I think of all the predictions from so-called "prophets" post-election promising God would overturn the results. I think of all the language of "winds shifting", "earth shaking", "movements rising", etc. and yet none of it ever seems to come to pass. Of course, a lot of it is just general enough to keep the person from ever being held accountable. Too many Christians have ignored the clear teaching of Scripture (Deuteronomy 18:21-22) that if a prophet claims to speak for God and what they say doesn't come to pass, they are to be rejected and never given any kind of influence ever again.

False prophets are nothing new, of course. Jeremiah had to deal with them in his own day. In fact, most of chapter 23 is a fiery sermon against such people. Jeremiah doesn't hold back in his harsh critique as he delivers God's judgment upon them. It's worth reading again. "You prophets who do nothing but dream— go ahead and tell your silly dreams. But you prophets who have a message from me— tell it truly and faithfully. What does straw have in common with wheat? Nothing else is like God's Decree. Isn't my Message like fire?" God's Decree. "Isn't it like a sledgehammer busting a rock? I've had it with the 'prophets' who get all their sermons secondhand from each other. Yes, I've had it with them. They make up stuff and then pretend it's a real sermon. Oh yes, I've had it with the prophets who preach the lies they dream up, spreading them all over the country, ruining the lives of my people with their cheap and reckless lies. I never sent these prophets, never authorized a single one of them. They do nothing for this people—nothing!" God's Decree. "And anyone, including prophets and priests, who asks, 'What's God got to say about all this, what's troubling him?' tell him, 'You, you're the trouble, and I'm getting rid of you.'" God's Decree. "And if anyone, including prophets and priests, goes around saying glibly 'God's Message! God's Message!' I'll punish him and his family. Instead of claiming to know what God says, ask questions of one another, such as 'How do we understand God in this?' But don't go around pretending to know it all, saying 'God told me this. . . God told me that. . . ' I don't want to hear it anymore. Only the person I authorize speaks for me. Otherwise, my Message gets twisted, the Message of the living God-of-the-Angel-Armies. You can ask the prophets, 'How did God answer you? What did he tell you?' But don't pretend that you know all the answers yourselves and talk like you know it all. I'm telling you: Quit the 'God told me this. . . God told me that. . . ' kind of talk." (Jeremiah 23:28-38 MSG)

Perhaps you've found yourself under the influence of a potential false prophet. Perhaps a friend or family member has sent you a link of someone they listen to regularly. Pay close attention. Too many pastors and preachers have merged the gospel with partisan politics. Too many pastors and preachers claim divine authority despite the number of ways they divide and damage the Body of Christ. Too many pastors and preachers refuse to humbly admit where they have made mistakes or gotten off track. Too many pastors and preachers practice revisionist history in an attempt to make themselves look good. Too many pastors and preachers glibly string together all sorts of "prophetic sounding" language from the Bible in order to make themselves seem more credible. It takes a lot of prayer and wisdom and

a relentless commitment to testing everything according to the truth of Scripture to discern in our day and age.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 25-28

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August 16, 2023
Saved

Readings for today: Jeremiah 25-28 (audio reading)

What does it mean to be saved? Salvation is multi-faceted to be sure but at a baseline level, it means we are saved from something. So what are we saved from? What doom awaited us apart from Christ? What judgment had we earned? What punishment did we deserve? What fate did we escape through Christ's atoning sacrifice? The reality is I don't ponder these questions near enough. My sinful baseline understanding of myself is that I'm a pretty good guy who makes poor decisions every now and again. The reality is far worse. Apart from Christ, I am a slave to sin. I love myself more than I do those around me. I prefer myself to anyone else. I will seek to satisfy myself before I stretch out a hand to help others. My entire life is oriented around my own wants, needs, and desires.

This is the human condition and it's why we find ourselves in the mess we're in. It's why some people starve in our world while others feast. It's why some people barely survive each day while others store up great wealth for the future. It's why some people live under monstrous oppression while others are free. It's why power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. It's why vast inequalities exist and we can't muster up the political and social will to make a change. It's why violent people take what they want by force. Force of will. Force of arms. Force of strength. Force of emotional manipulation. This was as true in Jeremiah's day as it is for us and listen again to the righteous response of God.

"God roars like a lion from high heaven; thunder rolls out from his holy dwelling— Ear-splitting bellows against his people, shouting hurrahs like workers in harvest. The noise reverberates all over the earth; everyone everywhere hears it. God makes his case against the godless nations. He's about to put the human race on trial. For the wicked the verdict is clear-cut: death by the sword." God's Decree. "Prepare for the worst! Doomsday! Disaster is spreading from nation to nation. A huge storm is about to rage all across planet Earth. Laid end to end, those killed in God's judgment that day will stretch from one end of the earth to the other. No tears will be shed and no burials conducted. The bodies will be left where they fall, like so much horse dung fertilizing the fields. Wail, shepherds! Cry out for help! Grovel in the dirt, you masters of flocks! Time's up—you're slated for the slaughterhouse, like a choice ram with its throat cut. There's no way out for the rulers, no escape for those shepherds. Hear that? Rulers crying for help, shepherds of the flock wailing! God is about to ravage their fine pastures. The peaceful sheepfolds will be silent with death, silenced by God's deadly anger. God will come out into the open like a lion leaping from its cover, And the country will be torn to pieces, ripped and ravaged by his anger." (Jeremiah 25:30-38 MSG)

There is only one way to escape this fate. Place your faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ. On the cross, Jesus suffered the doom we deserved. Jesus atoned for the sins of the world. Jesus took the judgment of God on Himself. He poured out His life. Suffered in our place. Died so that we may live. Let your soul rest in the shadow of the cross. Let your heart rest knowing your Savior stands over you still. Let your mind rest in the sure and certain knowledge that Jesus' death was sufficient to cover all your sin. Past. Present. Future. Rest and rejoice in all Christ has done for you and won for you today.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 29-32

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August 17, 2023
The Faithfulness of God

Readings for today: Jeremiah 29-32 (audio reading)

God's anger lasts but a moment but His favor for a lifetime. God abounds in steadfast love and faithfulness even as He is committed to holding the guilty accountable. Though His judgment extends to the third and fourth generations, His grace far exceeds it, extending to a thousand generations. This is who God is. This is who God has revealed Himself to be. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He always stays true to Himself.

The people of Israel learned this lesson. They refused to turn from their sin and they were judged. God exiled them to Babylon. They became a strange people living in a strange land, weeping as they sang the songs of Zion. They were uprooted from the Promised Land. They lost their Holy Temple. Their entire way of life was destroyed. Their covenant with God seemingly irretrievably broken. So what now? "Build houses and make yourselves at home. Plant gardens and eat what grows. Marry and have children. Encourage your children to marry and have children. Thrive in the country where I have sent you. Make yourselves at home there and work for her welfare. Pray for her well-being. Your well-being is intrinsically tied up to her well-being. Most of all, trust Me. I know what I'm doing. I have it all planned out. I will bring you back home. I will not abandon you. I will take care of you. I will give you the future you hope for. So call on Me and I will listen. Look for Me and I will make Myself known. I won't disappoint you. I won't let you down if you get serious about finding Me and want it more than anything else." (Adapted from Jeremiah 29:5-14 MSG)

Do we have the faith to believe these words are as much for us as they were for the people of God in Jeremiah's day? Do we trust God enough to let go of our ego, let go of our need for control, let go of our need for power and let Him direct our paths? Do we have the courage to live the quiet life? Go about our daily business? Build homes? Plant gardens? Marry and have children? Bless our town? Pray for our community's leaders? Let God work out His plan in His way according to His timing? This is the essence of faith. It's living our lives with complete trust in God's sovereign plan and, more importantly, God's unchangeable character. God is trustworthy. God is true. God is dependable. God is loyal. God is faithful. God is good. Because of all these things and more, we have nothing to fear. Because of all these things and more, we can cast all our anxieties on Him. Because of all these things and more, we don't have to push so hard or hold on so tight. God is in control. God knows what He's doing. God has a plan. He will bring it to pass. He has not abandoned you. He has plans to take care of you. He will give you the future you hope for if you surrender to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 33-37

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August 18, 2023
Amazing Grace

Readings for today: Jeremiah 33-37 (audio reading)

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

But even now at the eleventh hour, there is hope. God's mercy makes one last appearance. God commands Jeremiah to speak a word of grace to the nation. To speak words of life instead of death. "Call to me and I will answer you. I'll tell you marvelous and wondrous things that you could never figure out on your own." "But now take another look. I'm going to give this city a thorough renovation, working a true healing inside and out. I'm going to show them life whole, life brimming with blessings. I'll restore everything that was lost to Judah and Jerusalem. I'll build everything back as good as new. I'll scrub them clean from the dirt they've done against me. I'll forgive everything they've done wrong, forgive all their rebellions. And Jerusalem will be a center of joy and praise and glory for all the countries on earth. They'll get reports on all the good I'm doing for her. They'll be in awe of the blessings I am pouring on her." (Jeremiah 33:3, 6-9 MSG) Yes, they cannot escape God's judgment. Yes, they cannot escape the exile to come. But this is not the final word. God will not allow His eternal covenant to be broken.

"Watch for this: The time is coming'—God's Decree—'when I will keep the promise I made to the families of Israel and Judah. When that time comes, I will make a fresh and true shoot sprout from the David-Tree. He will run this country honestly and fairly. He will set things right. That's when Judah will be secure and Jerusalem live in safety. The motto for the city will be, "God Has Set Things Right for Us." God has made it clear that there will always be a descendant of David ruling the people of Israel and that there will always be Levitical priests on hand to offer burnt offerings, present grain offerings, and carry on the sacrificial worship in my honor." (Jeremiah 33:14-18 MSG)

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

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 38-40, Psalms 74, 79

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August 19, 2023
Believing the Lie

Readings for today: Jeremiah 38-40, Psalms 74, 79 (audio reading)

As a pastor, I meet with a lot of people. Most of the time, it's to catch up or get to know each other better. However, a significant portion of my time is spent with people in crisis. The problem could be physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. It could involve a spouse, a parent, or a child. It might be job-related. It could be about broken relationships. Whatever the issue - and they are legion - what I have found is that if I drill down far enough, I eventually get to a lie they have believed. A falsehood that has framed their thinking. And a huge part of my counseling approach is to help them identify the lies they believe and exchange them for the truth of the gospel. After all, it is the truth that sets us free according to Christ. And the sad reality is far too many believers make bad decisions based on lies they've been fed or told themselves for so many years.

The same was true for Zedekiah. He believed the lie that he could withstand the might of Babylon. He believed the walls of Jerusalem could never be breached because God was her protector. He believed in the false prophets he surrounded himself with and often persecuted true prophets like Jeremiah. The consequences of his decision to believe the lies are horrific. His own sons are captured, paraded in front of him, and then executed. His officials and nobles are killed before him as well. Every single person he knows and loves loses their life as a result of the choices he made along the way. These are the last images he will ever see because Nebuchadnezzar blinds him and hauls him off to Babylon in chains. Imagine how different things could have been if he had just listened to Jeremiah? Imagine how much pain and suffering he could have avoided had he listened to God and surrendered peacefully? Imagine how much bloodshed would have been avoided if he had placed his trust in the truth of God's Word?

Now imagine these same dynamics are in play in your life. What lies do you believe? About your spouse? Your child? Your parents? Your co-workers? Your friends? What falsehoods have you allowed to take root in your heart that cause you to devalue yourself and others? How have you been deceived into thinking God doesn't care or doesn't hear your prayers? Friends, don't believe the lies! Immerse yourself in Scripture and cling to the promises God offers us in His Son Jesus Christ. Discern what is true and noble and good and righteous and fill your mind with these things. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you God's perspective on your life and lives of those around you. As you cling to the truth, you will find yourself being set free.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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August 21, 2023
Open Your Eyes

Reading for today: 2 Kings 24-25, 2 Chronicles 36:1-21, Jeremiah 52 (audio reading)

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.

We sang these famous words yesterday during worship and they never cease to move me. I found myself thinking about John Newton who first penned those words as he reflected back on his life as a slave ship captain. I found myself thinking about my own spiritual blindness as a young man before meeting Christ at college. And then I read today's passage about the fall of the Kingdom of Judah and the end of the reign of Zedekiah and once again, the words ran through my brain. What is it that keeps us from seeing God? What is it that keeps us from seeing the world as God sees it? Seeing other human beings as God sees them? Why are we so blind?

The answer, of course, is sin. Sin is a condition we are born into. A power we are born enslaved to. It's not something we can escape on our own and it keeps us from seeing and trusting God. I don't know about you but when I read the stories from the Kings and Chronicles, I find myself wondering why these kings struggled so much to follow God. Why did they not place their trust in Him? Did they not know their history? Could they not see that when kings were faithful, God brought blessing and when kings were unfaithful, God brought the curse? Why were they so blind? The Scriptures make much of Zedekiah's blindness. Jeremiah mentions it twice. The historians of Israel mention it as well. Perhaps it's a painful reminder of how broken Zedekiah had become or perhaps it signals something deeper. A spiritual blindness that afflicted Zedekiah for years before God's judgment fell.

As I said above, I remember my own spiritual blindness. I was raised in the church. My parents were faithful to take me to worship every Sunday. I sang in the choir. I was a leader at youth group. By all accounts, I was incredibly engaged. However, my heart was hard. I was blinded by my own desires. My own fears. My own doubts. I could not see God. I could not hear God. I did not want to follow God. This was all exposed my freshman year of college. Once outside of the protective rhythms and boundaries my parents set, I floundered. I was lost. I wandered aimlessly. I drank heavily. I skipped class. Most of all, I avoided God. When confronted, I blamed others. I blamed my professors. I blamed my friends. I was so blind I could not see the wretch I'd become.

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

I have no idea where you find yourself this morning. I have no idea if you are blind or if you can see. Perhaps you are like Zedekiah or like I was prior to receiving Christ. Groping in the dark. Stumbling around in the shadows. Blinded by your desires. Fears. Doubts. Failures. I am praying for you to have your eyes opened by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps you see dimly or through a glass darkly. Your vision is blurry because you have allowed something to come between you and Christ. I am praying you find

clarity as you fix your eyes on Jesus. Perhaps God has opened your eyes to His majesty and glory. Rejoice! Thank the Lord for the great work He has done! Ask Him to give you the grace to see even more clearly and distinctly and to help others do the same.

Reading for tomorrow: Jeremiah 41-44

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August 23, 2023
Logical Consequences

Readings for today: Obadiah, Psalms 82-83 (audio reading)

I have four children, all of whom have entered or are entering adulthood. One of the things we've tried hard to teach them over the years is the law of logical consequences. Every single one of our decisions in life - good or bad - results in consequences. When we are responsible and do the right thing, most of the time the consequences are good. We are blessed. We succeed. We get ahead. When we are irresponsible and do the selfish thing, most of the time the consequences are bad. We struggle. We invite all kinds of anxiety and fear into our lives. We fall behind. I realize it's not always this way. Life does have a way of throwing us curves. Sometimes those who are irresponsible are blessed. Those are responsible are cursed. The rain falls on the just and unjust alike. But I do believe, by and large, logical consequences hold true.

What is true for us as individuals is also true for the nations. God is the judge of the nations of the earth and His judgments are always righteous and good. He repays the wicked for their wickedness and He blesses those who walk in faithful obedience. Consider the nation of Edom. Descendants of Esau. Jacob's brother. One would think their bonds of kinship would make them allies for Israel but sadly, they were most often enemies. When Israel struggled and needed them the most, they refused to help. Not only that but they took advantage of her weakness and exploited her brokenness for their own gain. They refused to lift a finger as Israel was carted off into exile. They laughed at the plight of their cousins, refusing to give shelter to refugees. God, of course, was watching. He took note of how Edom treated Israel and He will judge them for their sins.

"God's Judgment Day is near for all the godless nations. As you have done, it will be done to you. What you did will boomerang back and hit your own head. Just as you partied on my holy mountain, all the godless nations will drink God's wrath. They'll drink and drink and drink— they'll drink themselves to death. But not so on Mount Zion—there's respite there! a safe and holy place! The family of Jacob will take back their possessions from those who took them from them. That's when the family of Jacob will catch fire, the family of Joseph become fierce flame, while the family of Esau will be straw. Esau will go up in flames, nothing left of Esau but a pile of ashes." God said it, and it is so." (Obadiah 1:15-18 MSG)

If you are like me, you often wonder at the state of the world. You get frustrated and angry when you see corruption in political leadership, the powerful exploit the powerless, nations invade other nations, and the impact this has on the poorest of the world. You may even cry out to God - as I often do - "How long, O Lord? How long will you let such things stand?" Obadiah is a great reminder of the coming Judgment Day of God where all things will be set right. Evil will be repaid with evil. Good with good. Righteousness will win the day. Justice will be done. The consequences of our choices will fall either on us or on Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 45-48

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August 24, 2023
God's Personal Attention

Readings for today: Jeremiah 45-48 (audio reading)

Sometimes I wonder why God is interested in my life. Of all the billions of people who live or who have lived on this earth, why in the world would God take time for me? I'm not all that important. I'm not all that significant. My life is pretty mundane as a general rule. I get up. Brush my teeth. Take a shower. Go to work. Come home. Eat dinner. Spend time with my family. Watch a show or read a good book. God has a cosmos to run. He has a universe to rule. He's got nations to raise up and take down. Why would He take an interest in me?

Then I read this Word today for Baruch in Jeremiah 45. In the middle of one of the major prophetic books of the Bible which details the future empires and nations, God takes time out to address Baruch. Jeremiah's scribe. His secretary. A man who barely makes a blip on the radar screen. We don't know much about Baruch other than he was devoted to Jeremiah. He served as his scribe. His disciple. His faithful friend. He sticks with Jeremiah through thick and thin. Through all the ups and downs. He must have loved Jeremiah very much to share in his sufferings. According to Josephus, an ancient Jewish historian, Baruch was a member of the Jewish aristocracy. A chamberlain in King Zedekiah's court. He was clearly a courageous man as he often acted as Jeremiah's messenger and mouthpiece. He risked all kinds of danger to make known the Word of God. And God recognized his efforts.

"These are the words of God, the God of Israel, to you, Baruch. You say, 'These are bad times for me! It's one thing after another. God is piling on the pain. I'm worn out and there's no end in sight.' "But God says, 'Look around. What I've built I'm about to wreck, and what I've planted I'm about to rip up. And I'm doing it everywhere—all over the whole earth! So forget about making any big plans for yourself. Things are going to get worse before they get better. But don't worry. I'll keep you alive through the whole business.'" (Jeremiah 45:2-5 MSG) Baruch clearly went through times of depression. Times of deep discouragement. I am sure he despaired as he looked around at what was happening to his country. But God was faithful. He let Baruch know how and why these things would come to pass but also promised to preserve his life. No matter where Baruch went, God would be with him. He would protect him and provide for him. He would be blessed. (By the way, Baruch literally means "blessed" in Hebrew.)

What about you? How are you feeling as you survey the landscape of our nation today? What emotions rise up in your heart as you watch the news or scroll through social media? How have the issues of the past few years impacted you? Have you found yourself - like Baruch - crying out to God saying, "These are bad times for me! It's one thing after another. God is piling on the pain. I'm worn out and there's no end in sight." I know I can my own feelings of despair as I consider the mountain of gospel work that must be done in my church family, in my community, in our nation, and around the world. It is daunting to say the least! I believe God is breaking down what He has built and plucking up what He has planted in order to draw the world to Himself. In the midst of all that is happening, do I trust God to be faithful? To protect and preserve my life for as long as He wills? Do I trust God to be with me as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death? Do I see myself as blessed? Am I willing to put the work in to be a blessing even if that means confronting the powers and principalities of our own world just as Baruch confronted the powers and principalities in his?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 49-50

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August 25, 2023
The Miracle of God's Chosen People

Readings for today: Jeremiah 49-50 (audio reading)

History is littered with the ruins of empires. Civilizations come and go. Kings rise and fall. Even the most powerful like Rome or Egypt or China or the Ottoman Empire eventually succumb to Father Time. He truly is undefeated with one notable, miraculous exception. For thousands of years, God has preserved a people for Himself. For centuries, God has protected His people, guided His people, and prevented their annihilation. Has there ever been a group more oppressed than the Jewish people? Has there ever been a group more targeted by more pagan empires than the people of God? Egypt tried to wipe them out. Assyria, Babylon, and eventually the Persian Empire tried to bring an end to the Jewish people. Those empires gave way to the pogroms of Europe, the Crusades and Inquisition of the Roman Catholic Church, and eventually the Final Solution in Germany. Even in our time, there has been a marked rise in anti-semitism. Synagogues have been attacked. Jewish homes and businesses targeted. It is happening in America as well as across Europe and, of course, the Middle East. Many of the nations surrounding modern-day Israel still make her complete destruction the cornerstone of their foreign policy though, thankfully, there are signs that may be changing.

The reading from Jeremiah for today seems to highlight this reality. Jeremiah lists the number of nations who will rise and fall while Israel endures. Ammon. Edom. Damascus. Kedar. Elam. Even Babylon herself! The names may not mean much to us but these were the tribal and even global powers of their day. All of them thrown on the trash heap of history by God Himself. All of them consigned to the dustbin of history by the Lord. Their gods have been forgotten. Their cities lay in ruins. Their glory forgotten. Meanwhile, Israel endures. Though she has been consistently oppressed and persecuted. Though she has been beaten down and chased from seemingly every nation on earth. Though she has had to endure so much, she remains. She is still here. She still finds ways to not just survive but even to thrive. Surely, one can see the hand of the Lord in this?

Does this mean Israel is perfect? Absolutely not. Jeremiah and the rest of the prophets catalog her sins. What was true for ancient Israel holds true for modern day Israel as well. She continues to perpetuate the sins of her past in many ways. In many ways, she looks just like the ungodly nations around her. She acts just like the ungodly nations around her. The same is true for the church as well. Those of us who've been "grafted in" as part of the people of God as the Apostle Paul puts it in Romans 11. We too look far too much like the world. We've adopted the ways and means of the world to try and accomplish Kingdom ends and it never seems to work out well. Quite the opposite, in fact. Thankfully, God is faithful in the face of our unfaithfulness. God is loyal in the face of our betrayal. God is good in the face of our evil. God is righteous in the face of our unrighteousness. He preserves and protects us even from ourselves. Though we are "lost sheep" and our "shepherds lead us astray." Though we "wander aimless through the hills and lose track of home." Though we "can't remember where we came from and everyone tries to take advantage of us." Though our "abandoned our True Pasture and the hope of our ancestors", God will never let us go. He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep. He will make us lie down in green pastures. He will lead us beside still waters. He will restore our souls if we but turn to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 51, Psalm 137

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August 26, 2023
False Gods

Readings for today: Jeremiah 51, Psalm 137 (audio reading)

The human race is haunted by the primordial memory of a relationship with God. It's coded into our DNA. It's like a hole in our souls. We simply cannot deny it nor can we dismiss it or ignore it. It's arguably what makes Homo Sapiens unique among all other animal species. And it's why we crave transcendence. It's why we engage in worship. It's why we feel the way we do when we see a beautiful sunrise or breathe the air on the summit of a mountain or feel the power as we swim in the depths of the ocean. There is a sense of awe and wonder embedded deep within all of our hearts. This is why we are so adept at making our own gods. We have a desperate need to connect with the divine. We make them out of wood, stone, and precious metals. We give them all kinds of names. We associate them with all sorts of activities. Some of them are very human-like. Others are quite other-worldly. Some of them even represent a combination of species. All of them represent power and control to us on some level which is why we seek to appease them. But they are false. They are not real. They carry no weight. They have no authority. They are empty and lifeless which is why God, the True God, hates them so very much.

As Christians, we worship the True God. How do I know? I know because He has revealed Himself in the Person of Jesus Christ. He actually entered human history and became one of us. His suffering and death is a matter of historical record as is His resurrection. The tomb was empty and hundreds of eye-witnesses saw Him face to face. They touched Him. They ate with Him. They spoke with Him. In Christ, God made Himself known. No other religion can make this kind of claim. No other god or goddess has revealed him/herself in this way. This is what sets us apart. It's what gives us confidence that when we pray and when we obey and when we place our faith in God, we are not just engaging in wishful thinking. Our hopes are not blind. Our faith is not just a wild guess. We believe in the One True and Living God who created all things, redeemed all things, and one day will make all things new. I love how Jeremiah describes it in today's reading...

"By his power he made earth. His wisdom gave shape to the world. He crafted the cosmos. He thunders and rain pours down. He sends the clouds soaring. He embellishes the storm with lightnings, launches the wind from his warehouse. Stick-god worshipers look mighty foolish! god-makers embarrassed by their handmade gods! Their gods are frauds, dead sticks— deadwood gods, tasteless jokes. They're nothing but stale smoke. When the smoke clears, they're gone. But the Portion-of-Jacob is the real thing; he put the whole universe together, With special attention to Israel. His name? God-of-the-Angel-Armies!" (Jeremiah 51:15-19 MSG)

Why does our God hate false gods so much? It's because they are frauds. They are nothing but smoke and hot air. They offer nothing because they have no power or authority. Those who place their trust in false gods end up bitterly disappointed. They end up wounded and in pain. They receive no strength to overcome their challenges, no wisdom to help address the complex issues life often throws our way, and no power to help us endure any suffering. They are left alone and it's not good for human beings to be alone! I think of a conversation I had with one of my kids several years ago. She had a friend who was suffering from all kinds of mental, emotional, and physical health issues. She had no one to talk to. No support from her family. No friends to speak of besides my daughter. No trust in her teachers at school. She felt very much alone. Not only that but she had placed her faith in false gods. Spirit animals who were not real and so had no spiritual resources to draw on to help her make it through. I encouraged my daughter to share Christ with her. To help her connect with a God who is real and alive

and active in our world. A God who loved her with an everlasting love and who promised to be there for her no matter what she challenges she might be going through. A God who is with us in good times and bad. A God who is faithful to walk us through every dark valley. This is why what we believe matters, friends! If we are counting on false gods to get us through life, we will be let down. We will live lives of fear and anxiety and quiet desperation. But if we place our faith in the true God, we will never be forsaken.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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August 28, 2023
Dealing with Despair

Readings for today: Lamentations 1:1-3:36 (audio reading)

Reading Lamentations is hard work. It's hard to enter into the pain and heartbreak Jeremiah feels as he watches his nation be razed to the ground. All he holds dear vanishes in a moment. His friends are struck down by the enemy. Those who are left face mass starvation and forced deportation. They are beset on every side. There is nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. There is no peace. No security. Everything they once counted on is now gone. We can't even begin to imagine what it must feel like. Thankfully, we've never had to face such things in America. But I've spent time with those who have. I've visited camps where internally displaced people live who've lost everything due to war and conflict and violence. The conditions they live in are brutal. The challenges they face everyday are overwhelming. The pain they go through is unbearable. Their suffering is immense. I have wept with them. Prayed with them. Done what little I can to help them. Mostly, I've been completely at a loss to know what to do.

Despair is hard to handle. It overwhelms the senses. It fills us with anxiety and fear. It paralyzes us. We can't see a way forward. We can't think straight. It leaves us feeling helpless and hopeless and utterly lost and alone. Jeremiah is expressing all these feelings and more as he writes his lament for Jerusalem and his people. He is not writing as an impartial observer. He is not concerned with being objective. He is feeling everything they are feeling. He is experiencing everything they are experiencing. His struggle with despair is just as real. But Jeremiah has one thing many of his people do not. He has faith. He trusts in the Lord. He takes his despair at all he sees and experiences to God and lays it at His feet. Listen again as he describes it in his own words...

"I'll never forget the trouble, the utter lostness, the taste of ashes, the poison I've swallowed. I remember it all—oh, how well I remember—the feeling of hitting the bottom. But there's one other thing I remember, and remembering, I keep a grip on hope: God's loyal love couldn't have run out, his merciful love couldn't have dried up. They're created new every morning. How great your faithfulness! I'm sticking with God (I say it over and over). He's all I've got left. God proves to be good to the man who passionately waits, to the woman who diligently seeks. It's a good thing to quietly hope, quietly hope for help from God. It's a good thing when you're young to stick it out through the hard times. When life is heavy and hard to take, go off by yourself. Enter the silence. Bow in prayer. Don't ask questions: Wait for hope to appear. Don't run from trouble. Take it full-face. The "worst" is never the worst. Why? Because the Master won't ever walk out and fail to return. If he works severely, he also works tenderly. His stockpiles of loyal love are immense. He takes no pleasure in making life hard, in throwing roadblocks in the way." (Lamentations 3:19-33 MSG)

What a powerful testimony and what a great reminder. On some level, I imagine all of us know what it's like to hit rock bottom. All of us have faced trouble in our lives. All of us have tasted the ashes. Swallowed the poison. Felt utterly lost and alone on some level. What I've discovered in my own life is that's where God does His best work. When I came to the end of myself in 2009, I found God waiting for me there. When things were at their darkest and I had nothing left and nowhere to turn, God was with me. His loyal love did not run out. His merciful love never dried up. His faithfulness was great and transcended my broken condition. In my despair, I surrendered to Him. I entered the silence. I bowed my head in prayer. I stopped striving and trying so hard. I learned to wait. And to face my fears head on. What I discovered is the worst is never the worst because God is faithful. He will deliver those who turn to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Lamentations 3:37-5:22

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August 29, 2023
Processing our Pain

Readings for today: Lamentations 3:37-5:22 (audio reading)

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 do you think "spoke and it happened"? It's the Master who gives such orders. Doesn't the High God speak everything, good things and hard things alike, into being? And why would anyone gifted with life complain when punished for sin? Let's take a good look at the way we're living and reorder our lives under God. Let's lift our hearts and hands at one and the same time, praying to God in heaven..." (Lamentations 3:37-42 MSG) 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 30, 2023
The Glory of God

Readings for today: Ezekiel 1-4 (audio reading)

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 up. I have something to say to you." The moment I heard the voice, the Spirit entered me and put me on my feet. As he spoke to me, I listened." (Ezekiel 2:1-2 MSG) 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 picked me up. Behind me I heard a great commotion—"Blessed be the Glory of God in his Sanctuary!"—the wings of the living creatures beating against each other, the whirling wheels, the rumble of a great earthquake. The Spirit lifted me and took me away. I went bitterly and angrily. I didn't want to go. But God had me in his grip. I arrived among the exiles who lived near the Kebar River at Tel Aviv. I came to where they were living and sat there for seven days, appalled." (Ezekiel 3:12-15 MSG)

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. "God grabbed me by the shoulder and said, "Get up. Go out on the plain. I want to talk with you." So I got up and went out on the plain. I couldn't believe my eyes: the Glory of God! Right there! It was like the Glory I had seen at the Kebar River. I fell to the ground, prostrate. Then the Spirit entered me and put me on my feet. He said, "Go home and shut the door behind you." And then something odd: "Son of man: They'll tie you hand and foot with ropes so you can't leave the house. I'll make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so you won't be able to talk and tell the people what they're doing wrong, even though they are

a bunch of rebels. But then when the time is ripe, I'll free your tongue and you'll say, 'This is what God, the Master, says: . . .' From then on it's up to them. They can listen or not listen, whichever they like. They are a bunch of rebels!" (Ezekiel 3:22-27 MSG)

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 every tear. No matter what challenges you may face, know God is with you today!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 5-8

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August 31, 2023

Justice

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 5-8](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

God is just. It's a fundamental attribute of His divine character. He will not let the guilty go unpunished. He will not let evil escape judgment. He will not let those who commit crimes get off. He is fiercely committed to enforcing His Law. And, in the abstract, I think everyone expects God to be just. We want Him to judge the guilty. We want those who commit great evil to get their due. We just don't ever want it to happen to us.

God's justice is a common theme in the prophets. God's people have been stockpiling sin for generations. God has graciously withheld His righteous judgment to give them ample opportunity to repent but eventually justice must have its day. Ezekiel lives in such a time. Israel is finally going to pay for her sins. She is going to pay for all the abuse of power, arrogance and pride, violence, oppression, exploitation, and idolatry she has committed. There is no question of her guilt. God sees all and knows all. Not a single crime escapes His notice. His ledger is full and detailed. As harsh as it may seem, they've earned all they're going to get. The destruction of Jerusalem. The suffering and death of so many at the hands of the Babylonians. God refuses to relent until every last sin is paid for in full.

I recently came across a thread on social media from a well-known, very progressive rabbi. He spends a lot of time harshly critiquing the Christian faith. One of his main critiques is the lack of justice in our faith. He simply believes a God who forgives is unjust. He is not worthy of worship. Yes, he knows atonement theology. He knows we believe Jesus became our substitute and took God's judgment on Himself. He just simply cannot bring himself to believe it. In fact, he gets angry when anyone presses him on it. He believes such an act makes God unrighteous. How could a just God punish the innocent in place of the guilty? What he misses, of course, or simply cannot accept, is the fact that Jesus is God Incarnate. God Himself taking on human flesh and becoming one of us in order that He might stand in our place. God didn't just choose some random person to pay for the sins of the world. He didn't sacrifice a prophet or good, moral teacher in our place. He laid down His own life to satisfy the demands of divine justice so that He, in turn, might show us mercy. That's what the gospel is all about and it continues to be a "stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."

I know it's not easy to read through passages like the one we read today. The blood and violence and righteous anger of God is disturbing. And yet, it should remind us yet again of the unbelievable sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf. It should fill our hearts with gratitude for all Jesus has done for us. Jesus took my place. Jesus stood in my stead. Jesus paid the price I had earned. He endured the punishment I deserved. He did this so that I might be washed clean, set free, and live with Him for all eternity.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 9-12

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