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September 1, 2023
God With Us

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

It is hard for us to fathom the national catastrophe that befell Israel. Harder still for us to understand the depth of their pain and suffering. Living as we do in the world's most powerful nation, we cannot begin to grasp what it would be like to watch your entire way of life destroyed. However, all of that pales in comparison to the tragedy Ezekiel sees in his vision today. All the destruction. The loss of life. The famine and disease. And none of that would have even come close to touching the inconsolable grief he felt as he watched the Lord leave His Temple.

From the moment God in-dwelt the Tabernacle in the wilderness, Israel had never been alone. They enjoyed His protection. They had enjoyed His provision. He had given them victory after victory. Established them in the Promised Land. Taken up residence in Jerusalem once they built the Temple. Over time, the Israelites began to take His Presence for granted. In fact, there was a sense in Jeremiah and Ezekiel's time that the Lord was somehow "trapped" in the Temple. They believed they had the Lord caged. He had ceased to be their god and had now become a pagan totem. A magic talisman that kept them from evil. This is why they stubbornly refused to leave Jerusalem when Jeremiah called them to submit to Nebuchadnezzar. They falsely believed as long as they had the Lord locked down in His Temple that they could never be defeated.

Imagine their shock when Ezekiel relates his vision of the Lord leaving the Temple. Departing from the east gate. Rising above the cherubim where He normally sat. Heading out of the city that bore His name. Imagine their fear as their one hope departs, leaving them alone for the first time since their days in Egypt. It's difficult for us wrap our minds around simply because we believe God is everywhere all the time. We hold onto the promise that God is always with us. We trust He will never leave us or forsake us.

But what if the Lord is leading us into exile? What if the Lord is leading us into a season of suffering? What if the Lord is seeking to refine us and sanctify us? Are we willing to go where He leads? The reality is we often take the Lord for granted as well. We too act as if He's "trapped" in a relationship with us. As if God is "bound" by His unconditional love for us. We falsely believe our thoughts, attitudes, and actions don't matter. We false believe we can reject holiness as a way of life. We falsely believe God's primary goal is our personal happiness. Nothing could be farther from the truth. God does love us with an everlasting love. God does love us unconditionally. Nothing can snatch us out of His hand. Yes. Yes. And yes. But make no mistake, God is not "bound" to us. He is not "trapped" in this relationship. He is not co-dependent on us nor does He allow our whims, our feelings, our desires to shape His will for our lives. We sin at our own risk. We run ahead of God at our own peril. We stubbornly refuse to follow Him to our own detriment.

Perhaps the best example of how God relates to us comes from the story Jesus tells of the prodigal son in Luke 15. The younger son comes to his father in the tale and asks for his inheritance. He wants nothing to do with his family any longer. He wants to be on his own. Live according to his own rules. Follow his own path. Find his own happiness. So he takes his money and leaves. The father lets him go. Many years pass. The son has spent all he has on sinful pursuits. He has abandoned all his father taught him. Now he's desperate. Alone. Afraid. Ashamed. One day he plucks up the courage to go home. He has no hope his father will accept back into the family but he thinks he might be able to catch on as a hired servant. But while he is far off, the father sees him. The father's been waiting by the door.

Watching out the window. Longing. Praying. Looking forward to the day when his son will come to his senses. The father runs to him. Embraces him. Gives him a robe to wear and places the signet ring back on his finger. He is home. He is one of the family again.

It's a powerful story. One that reminds us of the great love of God. It should also remind us of the consequences of our sin. The father never stopped loving the son just as God never stops loving us. But the father did let the son go. He did let the son make his own sinful decisions and then face the terrible consequences. The same was true for Israel. God did indeed come to dwell in His Temple. Like the father from the story, He loved His children unconditionally. Over and over He forgave them. But then there came a day when they finally said, "We don't want you here anymore. We don't want to be your children. We want to do our own thing. Live our own lives. Pursue our own happiness. Chase our own dreams. And they don't include you." So the Father did what they asked. He left His home in their hands. He removed His glorious presence. The result is pain. Suffering. Heartbreak. Such is always the case when we abandon God.

At the same time, Ezekiel sounds a note of hope. Presumably, God could have chosen to leave His Temple and head in any direction. However, He went east. East to where the exiles lived. East to Babylon. East to find His wayward children. East to be with them in captivity. East to comfort them in their diaspora. East to provide for them and make them prosper. East to join them so they never would be alone.

Friends, God's glory doesn't need a Temple or a house made with human hands or a sanctuary covered in gold. The Bible declares that we are temples of the Holy Spirit! Our hearts have become the residence of God Himself! This is why Ezekiel declares, "True, I sent you to the far country and scattered you through other lands. All the same, I've provided you a temporary sanctuary in the countries where you've gone. I will gather you back from those countries and lands where you've been scattered and give you back the land of Israel. You'll come back and clean house, throw out all the rotten images and obscene idols. I'll give you a new heart. I'll put a new spirit in you. I'll cut out your stone heart and replace it with a red-blooded, firm-muscled heart. Then you'll obey my statutes and be careful to obey my commands. You'll be my people! I'll be your God!" (Ezekiel 11:16-20 MSG) Furthermore, it's why the Apostle Paul will later declare, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16) Because God's Spirit has taken up residence in our hearts, we ourselves are "being transformed into the Christ's image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18) This is amazing! The great news of the gospel is that God's glory now lives in us!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 13-16

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September 2, 2023
God's Raw Emotion

Readings for today: Ezekiel 13-16 [\(audio reading\)](#)

There is immediate tension when you start talking about the emotions of God. Some within the Christian tradition believe Him to be impassible and therefore “without emotions” on some level. Some want to protect His immutable (unchanging) nature and therefore don’t like to think of God expressing any emotions lest we give the sense that He is driven by them. Some believe the description of the emotions of God that appear throughout the Bible are “anthropomorphisms” or examples of humans “projecting” onto God in an effort to understand Him. I don’t buy any of it. I think God is deeply emotional. I think He’s the author of all emotions. I think all emotions find their perfection in Him. I do not think His emotions in any way threaten His unchanging nature and consistency. Quite the opposite, I think we can count on His emotions just like we count on His righteousness, goodness, etc. I expect God to express anger when confronted with sin. I expect God to express compassion when drawing near the broken-hearted and crushed in spirit. I expect God to approach every human being with love. I expect God to hurt when we hurt and laugh when we laugh. This is the essence of what it means to be in relationship with Him.

God’s heartbreak is palpable in passages like Ezekiel 16. Here He lays out the history of His relationship with His people and expresses His deep grief over what they have become. Read the words again and hear the pain and anguish of God’s feelings of betrayal...

“On the day you were born your umbilical cord was not cut, you weren’t bathed and cleaned up, you weren’t rubbed with salt, you weren’t wrapped in a baby blanket. No one cared a fig for you. No one did one thing to care for you tenderly in these ways. You were thrown out into a vacant lot and left there, dirty and unwashed—a newborn nobody wanted. And then I came by. I saw you all miserable and bloody. Yes, I said to you, lying there helpless and filthy, “Live! Grow up like a plant in the field!” And you did. You grew up. You grew tall and matured as a woman, full-breasted, with flowing hair. But you were naked and vulnerable, fragile and exposed. I came by again and saw you, saw that you were ready for love and a lover. I took care of you, dressed you and protected you. I promised you my love and entered the covenant of marriage with you. I, God, the Master, gave my word. You became mine. I gave you a good bath, washing off all that old blood, and anointed you with aromatic oils. I dressed you in a colorful gown and put leather sandals on your feet. I gave you linen blouses and a fashionable wardrobe of expensive clothing. I adorned you with jewelry: I placed bracelets on your wrists, fitted you out with a necklace, emerald rings, sapphire earrings, and a diamond tiara. You were provided with everything precious and beautiful: with exquisite clothes and elegant food, garnished with honey and oil. You were absolutely stunning. You were a queen! You became world-famous, a legendary beauty brought to perfection by my adornments. Decree of God, the Master. But your beauty went to your head and you became a common whore, grabbing anyone coming down the street and taking him into your bed. You took your fine dresses and made “tents” of them, using them as brothels in which you practiced your trade. This kind of thing should never happen, never.” (Ezekiel 16:4-16 MSG)

Do you hear the heartbreak of God? Do you feel His pain as He reflects on what Israel has become after all He’s done for her? Now think about your own life. Think about all God has done for you. Did God meet you at a time in your life when you were spiritually orphaned and abandoned? Did He not reach down and save you when you were helpless and afflicted? Did He not walk by your side as you grew in wisdom and stature before God? Did He not fill you with His Spirit? Where have you, like Israel, fallen into complacency? Where have you, like Israel, begun to take God for granted? Where

have you, like Israel, perhaps given yourself to other gods? Played the spiritual harlot by worshiping idols in your own life? Do you not see how this breaks the heart of God? Again, this is what it means to be in a real relationship. It means God responds to everything we think, say, or do. He is not indifferent. He is not apathetic. He is not distant. He is engaged. He is involved. He is invested. And this lends eternal weight to the decisions we make on a daily basis.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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September 4, 2023
Personal Responsibility

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

“Whoever told you life was fair?” I cannot tell you the number of times I heard this phrase growing up. I would get angry because of some perceived favoritism whether it was from my parents at home or a teacher at school or a boss at work and I would argue with them that “it wasn’t fair.” My brothers got a toy I didn’t get. A classmate achieved a higher grade that I felt I deserved. A fellow employee got a bonus and I did not. It wasn’t fair in my mind and it frustrated the heck out of me. Interestingly enough, Israel makes the same argument against God in our reading for today. In Ezekiel 18, they accuse God of not being fair. They accuse Him of punishing them for the guilt of their ancestors. They accuse Him of unjustly sending them into exile. But God makes it plain that He holds each person accountable for their own sin. He refuses to punish a child for a parent’s action nor does He punish a parent for a child’s behavior. He sees all and knows all and preserves the lives of those who act righteously while taking the lives of those who act unrighteously.

“Do I hear you saying, ‘That’s not fair! God’s not fair!’? “Listen, Israel. I’m not fair? You’re the ones who aren’t fair! If a good person turns away from his good life and takes up sinning, he’ll die for it. He’ll die for his own sin. Likewise, if a bad person turns away from his bad life and starts living a good life, a fair life, he will save his life. Because he faces up to all the wrongs he’s committed and puts them behind him, he will live, really live. He won’t die...The upshot is this, Israel: I’ll judge each of you according to the way you live. So turn around! Turn your backs on your rebellious living so that sin won’t drag you down. Clean house. No more rebellions, please. Get a new heart! Get a new spirit! Why would you choose to die, Israel? I take no pleasure in anyone’s death. Decree of God, the Master. Make a clean break! Live!” (Ezekiel 18:25-28, 30-32 MSG)

I can already hear the protests. We all know evil people who live long lives and good people whose lives are cut short. We all know evil people who seemingly get ahead in the world and good people who struggle each and every day. We all know evil people often finish “first” because they are willing to do whatever it takes while good people often finish “last” because they are constrained by their goodness not justify unrighteous means to reach a righteous end. So is God lying here? No, He is not. We must remember God doesn’t operate on our timeline. He has eternity in view. All of us will appear before the judgment seat of Christ. All of us will have to give an account for the way we lived our lives. Not a single person will get a pass. Not a single person will escape this fate. Either we will have lived in such a way that we say “Thy will be done” to God or we will have lived in such a way that He will say “thy will be done” to us. No one will be in heaven who doesn’t want to be and no one will be in hell who hasn’t chosen it. This is what God is talking about when He refers to life and death. It’s about eternal life or eternal death. Which will we choose?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 21-24

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September 5, 2023
Seeking Justice

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

I remember my first trip into the inner city of Trenton, NJ. My wife and I were going there to spend time with mentors and friends. When we arrived, we parked outside their row home and I watched as my mentor stood on his front stoop and made eye contact with several different people on the block. When we went inside, I asked him what he was doing. He told me he was letting the people he lived among know I was under his protection. He lived in an impoverished neighborhood plagued by drugs and gang violence. Trenton has one of the highest homicide rates in the country. Every weekday evening at 5PM, the city empties out as government employees flee to the suburbs and gangs run the streets. When we lived nearby in grad school, there were very few restaurants. No hotels. No night life to speak of. It was a city desperate for redevelopment but there can be no such thing without justice.

I was reminded of Trenton when I read our passage today from Ezekiel. As I've shared before, we struggle when we get to the prophetic books of the Bible because of the harsh judgment of God. But then you start cataloging all the sins Israel has committed over the years. All the suffering she has caused. All the violence and corruption and idolatry. Add it all up and it starts to make sense. Chapter 22 begins with a question from God to his prophet. Essentially, is Jerusalem worthy of judgment? God's answer? Let me count the ways...

She is a "a city murderous to the core, just asking for punishment." (Ezekiel 22:3) Her leaders are corrupt. They are violent men who shed innocent blood. "Your leaders, the princes of Israel among you, compete in crime." (Ezekiel 22:6) The commandments are ignored. Father and mother are not honored. The Sabbath is not kept. The worship of the Living God is impure. (Ezekiel 22:7-8) Furthermore, the immigrant and refugee are exploited. The poor and fatherless and widows are not cared for. Bribery and extortion are common. (Ezekiel 22:7, 12) Sexual immorality is rampant. (Ezekiel 22:9-11) The priests of God commit sacrilege and heresy. They no longer follow the ritual purity rites set up by God to govern worship. The prophets of God tell lies. They embrace deceit. They whitewash the sins of God's people. The princes of God are greedy. Selfish. Power-hungry. Tyrants who only care about themselves. (Ezekiel 22: 26-28) And the people follow their lead.

No wonder God is angry! The people He called by His name and set apart for Himself to be a light to the Gentiles and a witness to the nations have now become an abomination. They commit sin with impunity. They have no shame. God has warned them over and over again and has been ignored. Now the sword of God's judgment will come. Israel will reap what she has rightfully sown. She will suffer God's judgment as He seeks to purify her once again. "Son of man, the people of Israel are slag to me, the useless byproduct of refined copper, tin, iron, and lead left at the smelter—a worthless slag heap. So tell them, 'God, the Master, has spoken: Because you've all become worthless slag, you're on notice: I'll assemble you in Jerusalem. As men gather silver, copper, iron, lead, and tin into a furnace and blow fire on it to melt it down, so in my wrath I'll gather you and melt you down. I'll blow on you with the fire of my wrath to melt you down in the furnace. As silver is melted down, you'll be melted down. That should get through to you. Then you'll recognize that I, God, have let my wrath loose on you.'" (Ezekiel 22:17-22 MSG)

The important thing to note here is that God's judgment is not an end in itself. It is always the means to a greater end which is to separate the dross from the silver. To refine all the impurities out of God's people. God places us in the "furnace of affliction" (Isaiah 48:10) in order to make us pure as gold. I

know this may be a new thought to some of you. You may not be used to hearing things like “God disciplines those He loves” but it’s true. I know when I look back at the hardest and most difficult times of my own life - growing up in an alcoholic home, losing my firstborn son, watching my career implode, almost losing my marriage, etc. - I can see how God used those times to expose some things that I needed to surrender to Him. He exposed my sin. He exposed my selfishness. He exposed my pride. He exposed my addictions. He brought all those things to the light of day so they could be dealt with once and for all at the cross. For it is at the cross of Christ where God’s judgment and God’s mercy meet. Surrender your will to Him, friends, so you may experience His mercy and grace today!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 25-28

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September 6, 2023
The Danger of Pride

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

Pride is an ever-present danger. It is the root of all sin. It is a fundamental attitude that says, “I don’t need God” or “there is no God.” Pride elevates Self and places him/her on the throne. Pride suggests “I don’t need any help.” Pride believes “I am sufficient on my own.” Pride asserts, “I am the master of my fate, the captain of my destiny.” None of these things are true, of course, but pride makes us believe them anyway. Pride blinds us to the utter weakness of our condition. Pride makes us think we are immune to random chance. Pride gives us a false sense of confidence that we are in control.

In Ezekiel, Tyre is the very embodiment of pride. It’s why the prophet spends so much time talking about her fall. She was the queen of city-states in the ancient world. Master of trade. Her ships traveled all over the Mediterranean bringing her great wealth and power. She built up a strong military. No one dared mess with her. As a city, she enjoyed order and peace which, in turn, allowed businesses thrive. She built up strong alliances all over the Middle East. She was at the pinnacle of her power when Nebuchadnezzar came with his armies and literally wiped her from the map. As such, she stands as an example to all of what happens to even the greatest of human civilizations. And it’s why the princes of the kingdoms around her weep over her fall. They see in her their own doom as well.

Pride is a false god. An idol of our own creation. It places us in a position we were never designed to hold. Human beings were created to live in humble reliance on God. We were created to live in intimate relationship with God. Trusting Him for all our needs, wants, and desires. We were created to give glory to God in all we think, do, or say. All we create. All we produce. All the resources we accumulate are intended to be tools in our hands to bring God even more honor and praise. When we live in right relationship with God, we are humble and self-effacing. We don’t think too highly of ourselves nor do we diminish ourselves. We simply think of ourselves less. Our hearts and minds become consumed with serving God and blessing others in His name.

Why is it so tempting to give into pride? To begin to believe in ourselves rather than trust God? To start reading our own headlines and believing our own hype? The reality is that we all want a taste of glory. We all want a share in what God has done. We all want some of the credit when it comes to our achievements and success. We all enjoy being the center of attention on some level. This is why social media is so addictive, by the way. And pushing back against this tide is hard. Swimming against this current is exhausting. Cutting against this grain requires intentionality and discipline and self-denial because everything in our world today is geared towards the elevation of self. Every message we get from the world seeks to glorify the self. It’s why spending time before God each day is so critical. We need to be regularly reminded of the distance between us and God and what God has done to close that gap for us. Daily reflection on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ keeps us in our knees before Him in humility and thankfulness.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 29-32

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September 7, 2023
Retributive vs. Redemptive Justice

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

Many years ago, I had a long discussion with a dear friend. Someone I loved and respected. A fellow clergy person, though he was a Muslim and I was a Christian. For months we debated the nature of God's justice. We probed the differences between Islam and Christianity. We wrestled over the problem of evil in the world and why God allows it. It was a wonderful discussion that challenged both of us. At the end of the day, I am not sure we moved the needle much for each other but we definitely came to a more clear understanding of how each of our faith's define the justice of God.

I found myself thinking of my friend as I read these passages from Ezekiel. He would have appreciated them. For him, they describe God's retributive justice perfectly. God deals with evil by sending it to hell. He deals with those who commit great evil by punishing them and sending them to the underworld. All those who attacked God's people get their due. All the pagan nations finally meet their fate. God gives none of them a pass. He refuses to relent until he has utterly broken them. There's something deep in all of us that can appreciate what God does here especially when we consider some of the horrific crimes committed against humanity throughout history.

God, however, is not in the business of retributive justice, even for the enemies of His people. What God wants is redemptive justice. A justice that restores rather than destroys. A justice focused more on rehabilitation than on punishment. A justice that expiates the guilty rather than condemns them. This is where Christians part ways with our Muslim friends. Islam has no mechanism for redemptive justice. All justice is ultimately retributive unless Allah decides - arbitrarily - to show mercy. Christianity, on the other hand, offers Jesus as a substitute in our place. Jesus makes atonement for our sin by enduring the full measure of God's righteous judgment on sin and evil. He suffers the just penalty for sin by dying the death we deserved.

In today's reading, the seeds of redemptive justice are sown. Over and over again, throughout this section, we see the purpose behind God's judgment. "Then they'll realize I am God." God wants the nations to acknowledge His Lordship. He wants them to set aside their idols and submit to His rule and reign. He wants them to bring an end to oppression and abuse and greed and exploitation and instead, walk in His ways. He wants the same for us as well.

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September 8, 2023
The Pastoral Calling

Readings for today: Ezekiel 33-36 (audio reading)

What does it mean to be a watchman? To be given God's Word to speak to a specific people in a specific place and time? To be able to look out on the culture at large and see the coming judgment? To speak to it not in anger or outrage but in tenderness and compassion and love? To lay aside any natural prophetic zeal and instead kneel in sackcloth and ashes and weep over the sins of God's people? To plead with them to return to the Lord with their whole hearts?

Ezekiel was a faithful prophet. He understood his call from the Lord clearly. He was to speak God's Word to God's people. Only God's Word. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else. He was to speak God's Word as boldly and clearly and compassionately as possible. He was to speak with full conviction and hold nothing back. In so doing, he is creating the conditions whereby God's people might respond in repentance and humility. It's important to note that the watchman is not responsible for the results. They are only responsible for the warning they provide. So Ezekiel's success or failure in ministry doesn't ride on how the people respond. Those who listen to his words will be saved. Those who reject his words will be destroyed. Ezekiel will only be held responsible to speak. Truthfully. Honestly. Openly. Transparently. "You, son of man, are the watchman. I've made you a watchman for Israel. The minute you hear a message from me, warn them. If I say to the wicked, 'Wicked man, wicked woman, you're on the fast track to death!' and you don't speak up and warn the wicked to change their ways, the wicked will die un-warned in their sins and I'll hold you responsible for their bloodshed. But if you warn the wicked to change their ways and they don't do it, they'll die in their sins well-warned and at least you will have saved your own life." (Ezekiel 33:7-9 MSG)

At the same time, I imagine Ezekiel loves his people. All good pastors do. We live and die with the decisions we watch people make. We grieve when they fail to turn from sin. We rejoice when we see true life change. We get discouraged when we see spiritual complacency. We get excited when we see someone finally hit rock bottom and turn to Jesus. So the burden of the watchman is a heavy one. I imagine Ezekiel felt this weight keenly. Especially as he watches God's people respond to the Word of God preached. Some rest in their own self-righteousness. Others turn from their wickedness. The ups and downs of ministry are reflected in these words from Ezekiel 33, "The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness, and the righteous shall not be able to live by his righteousness when he sins. Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die. Again, though I say to the wicked, 'There's more, son of man. Tell your people, "A good person's good life won't save him when he decides to rebel, and a bad person's bad life won't prevent him from repenting of his rebellion. A good person who sins can't expect to live when he chooses to sin." It's true that I tell good people, "Live! Be alive!" But if they trust in their good deeds and turn to evil, that good life won't amount to a hill of beans. They'll die for their evil life. On the other hand, if I tell a wicked person, "You'll die for your wicked life," and he repents of his sin and starts living a righteous and just life—being generous to the down-and-out, restoring what he had stolen, cultivating life-nourishing ways that don't hurt others—he'll live. He won't die. None of his sins will be kept on the books. He's doing what's right, living a good life. He'll live. Your people say, "The Master's way isn't fair." But it's the way they're living that isn't fair. When good people turn back from living good lives and plunge into sin, they'll die for it. And when a wicked person turns away from his wicked life and starts living a just and righteous life, he'll come alive. Still, you keep on

saying, “The Master’s way isn’t fair.” We’ll see, Israel. I’ll decide on each of you exactly according to how you live.” (Ezekiel 33:12-20 MSG)

There is nothing worse than seeing God’s people choose their own way over God’s Way. Nothing more disheartening God’s people choosing the path of pride and arrogance and selfishness and greed over the path of humility and surrender and selflessness and generosity. Nothing more discouraging than watching God’s people “live their truth” rather than embrace God’s Truth. It never ends well. God will not be mocked. He will not bless sin nor will He let us escape the consequences of our actions.

I think about all I see happening in our world today. There is such a lack of compassion and empathy and love towards those who are different than us. The differences may be ethnic. The differences may be economic. The differences may be political. The differences may be social. No matter where the differences lie, we seem to have so little tolerance for one another. Our hearts are extremely hard. And if we let our hearts continue to harden, we will end up expressing only anger and hate both of which are poison to the soul. We must renew our commitment to one another. We must recover our calling to be our brother’s and sister’s keeper. We must embrace the command God has given us to be watchmen and watchwomen for our families, neighbors, friends, and communities, always speaking His truth in love.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 37-40

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September 9, 2023
Live Again!

Readings for today: Ezekiel 37-40 (audio reading)

The valley of dry bones is one of my favorite passages in all the Bible. I love how God uses Ezekiel to literally raise the dead to new life. In a sense, every time I get up to preach this is my prayer. I ask God to awaken hearts that may have become dry and stale and bring new life through the preaching of His Word and the movement of His Spirit.

Of course, the power to raise the dead to new life doesn't come from me. And this is of great comfort! Ezekiel was simply called to prophesy. To speak the words God gave him. This was his act of faith. To declare the goodness and glory of God to a valley full of scattered bones. We never know what season we will find ourselves in. Some are born into seasons of revival where the church is vibrant and growing and seeking the Lord with all its heart. Some are born into seasons where the church is dying and struggling and enslaved to fear and sin. Ezekiel was called to be a prophet in exile. At a time in Israel's life where it seemed all hope had been lost. Their beautiful city had been destroyed. Their Temple razed to the ground. Their land conquered and occupied by foreign invaders. All the promises of God seemed to have come to an end. But in the midst of this national catastrophe, God brings a word of hope through His prophet. Ezekiel prophesies to the dry bones of Israel and a great "rattling" is heard. The scattered bones come together. Muscles and tissue and sinews form. The bodies rise. A great multitude as far as the eye could see. So Ezekiel prophesies again and the Spirit of God begins to blow. The dead bodies come alive! And why does God perform such a miracle? What is His primary aim and goal? Listen to what He tells Ezekiel. "I'll dig up your graves and bring you out alive—O my people! Then I'll take you straight to the land of Israel. When I dig up graves and bring you out as my people, you'll realize that I am God. I'll breathe my life into you and you'll live. Then I'll lead you straight back to your land and you'll realize that I am God. I've said it and I'll do it. God's Decree." (Ezekiel 37:12-14 MSG)

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

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

is hope! For God can meet us in our valleys just as surely as He met Ezekiel! God can raise us to new life in these valleys just as surely as He did the people of Israel! With God, hope is never completely lost!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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September 11, 2023
A New Temple

Readings for today: Ezekiel 41-44 (audio reading)

Imagine you are God for a moment. Your people are living in exile. They are defeated. Discouraged. Depressed. They desperately need their hope restored. Because you love them with an everlasting love, you have a plan to restore them to the Promised Land and return them to Jerusalem. How would you best communicate your intentions to your people? You would show them a rebuilt Temple where your glory would once again reside. You would give them a vision of renewed worship with people, priests, and princes all playing their respective roles. You would let them know your plan to dwell with them forever.

This is exactly what Ezekiel sees. He sees a vision of a new Temple restored in Jerusalem. He sees his people and their priests and their prince all serving faithfully in their respective, God-ordained roles. He is given the exact measurements of this Temple and each of its sacred spaces. He sees the glory of God as it fills the Temple once again and he falls to the ground in worship.

Historically, this passage has been notoriously difficult to interpret. Some believe Ezekiel was given a vision of a 3rd Temple that will be rebuilt on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Some take the opposite position and believe Ezekiel's vision is purely symbolic, depicting an "ideal" Temple that will never be built. Some take the position - as I do - that Ezekiel sees a vision of a heavenly Temple that will one day descend to earth and actually finds its fulfillment in John's vision of the heavenly city in the Book of Revelation. In fact, if one compares what Ezekiel sees with what John sees, there are a great number of similarities. The allusions to Eden. The river of God. The dimensions of the heavenly Temple and the heavenly city (both are perfectly square).

Of course, if one takes the eschatological view (whether you believe in a 3rd Temple being built on the Temple Mount or you believe in a heavenly Temple one day descending to earth in the New Jerusalem), you still are left to puzzle over why there would be an altar and sacrifices. After all, in John's vision there are no such things because Christ Himself has become the perfect sacrifice. Surely, there will be no more need for a sacrificial system in heaven so why would God include these in the vision He gives to His prophet?

Here one has to remember that God's revelation is progressive. He speaks to us in language and in terms we can understand. The people of Israel in Ezekiel's day had no frame of reference that would include a crucified and resurrected Messiah. Their knowledge of the worship of the Living God was limited by what they knew of the Law and what they had experienced throughout their history. God therefore gave them a vision of worship that they could understand. However, after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the people of God were ready for a new vision. A fresh vision. A fuller picture of what is to come and so John receives his revelation which acts as the fulfillment of the vision God first gave to Ezekiel. You and I are post-resurrection people. As such, we look forward to the day when our Messiah will return and commence His reign from His throne in the New Jerusalem. There will not be any need for a Temple or a sun or a moon for that matter for the Lord God will be our Temple and our Light. We will see Him face to face and walk with Him again in perfect relationship for all eternity.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 45-48

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September 12, 2023
Living Waters

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

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

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

But even this is just a foretaste of what's to come! In the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John receives a vision that sounds eerily similar to what Ezekiel received. "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations... The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price." (Revelation 22:1-2, 17) Friends, God is still on the move! Even after all these centuries, the living waters are still flowing. Lives are still being changed by the gospel. God refuses to remain in His Temple. His grace moves out into the wastelands of our world. Into the darkest places where death reigns. And His grace brings life. Hope. Joy. Peace. Churches sprout up along its banks, bearing the fruit of the Spirit to sustain the nations. As they seek Christ themselves, they find their leaves never wither. The world itself is renewed. Restored. Redeemed. Where O Death is now thy sting? Where O Death is now thy victory? The Living Water that Christ offers us fills the void! It becomes a spring of water welling up continually in our souls. Healing our hurts. Easing our pain. Comforting our grief. Sustaining us until the day when Christ will come again to wipe away every tear and make all things new.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 1-3

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September 13, 2023
Courage of Conviction

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

Daniel is one of my favorites. He is a man sold out to God. No matter what life throws at him, he never once seems to waver. When he was a young man, he was carted off into exile in Babylon. A traumatic, painful experience. Once he arrived in Babylon, he was identified as a young man of promise and removed from his family. Sequestered in the king's household, he began training as a wise man. Someone who would counsel the king on the most important matters. Someone who would serve the empire and seek to expand its influence and power. One can easily imagine the internal struggle Daniel must have felt. How does he serve God faithfully while counseling one of the great tyrants in history? How does he speak God's truth to a pagan power? How does he maintain his integrity even as he counsels a king whose ego is out of control?

The challenges start early. As part of his training, he is presented with unclean food to eat. Right off the bat, he has a choice to make. Will he trust God or will he compromise his convictions? Here it is critical to note how Daniel responds. It will become the pattern for the rest of his life. "But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "But Daniel determined that he would not defile himself by eating the king's food or drinking his wine, so he asked the head of the palace staff to exempt him from the royal diet. The head of the palace staff, by God's grace, liked Daniel, but he warned him, "I'm afraid of what my master the king will do. He is the one who assigned this diet and if he sees that you are not as healthy as the rest, he'll have my head!" But Daniel appealed to a steward who had been assigned by the head of the palace staff to be in charge of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: "Try us out for ten days on a simple diet of vegetables and water. Then compare us with the young men who eat from the royal menu. Make your decision on the basis of what you see." (Daniel 1:8-13 MSG) First and foremost, Daniel resolves to remain faithful to God's Law. He will not eat unclean food. At the same time, he recognizes his convictions put the chief eunuch in a tough position. If Daniel and his friends refuse to eat and start to suffer physically, the eunuch is going to be punished so Daniel comes up with a plan. Essentially, let us do it God's way for ten days and then compare us with the rest of the group. If we don't measure up, we'll do it your way. It's a brilliant approach. Daniel remains faithful to God. He is able to share with the eunuch the reason for his hope. And he treats the man with gentleness and respect.

Fast forward a few years. Now Daniel has taken his place among the wise men of Babylon. A decree goes out that everyone is to be killed because no one can pass the king's test. Once again, Daniel approaches the captain of the guard with gentleness and respect. He asks for an audience with the king. He trusts God to reveal the mystery in prayer. And when given his audience, he testifies to the greatness and power of God and the king humbles himself before him.

A few more years pass. The king grows so insecure he decides to build a monument to himself and demand everyone fall down in worship before it. It's the height of arrogance. Daniel doesn't appear in this story but his colleagues do. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego follow his example. Confronted with a situation which would force them to break the second commandment, they refuse to bow down in worship and instead stand faithful. The king is furious but the men answer him with grace and truth. "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered King Nebuchadnezzar, "Your threat means nothing to us. If you throw us in the fire, the God we serve can rescue us from your roaring furnace and anything

else you might cook up, O king. But even if he doesn't, it wouldn't make a bit of difference, O king. We still wouldn't serve your gods or worship the gold statue you set up." (Daniel 3:13-18 MSG) They are thrown into a furnace of fire. The king and his courtiers watch, waiting for them to be consumed. An incredible miracle happens as God Himself appears and delivers them from death. The result is again the humbling of the king. "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego! He sent his angel and rescued his servants who trusted in him! They ignored the king's orders and laid their bodies on the line rather than serve or worship any god but their own." (Daniel 3:28 MSG)

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 4-6

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September 14, 2023
Loving Those Who Do Not Believe

Readings for today: Daniel 4-6 (audio reading)

One of the hallmarks of a Christian is her heart for the lost. We are commanded in Scripture to love those who are lost. To have compassion on those who do not yet know God. To reach out to them. To serve them. To bless them in the name of Jesus. The examples from Scripture are legion. From the beginning where God demonstrates His love for Adam and Eve and Cain even amidst their sin. To the love Abraham showed for the people of Sodom, interceding for them when they faced destruction. Moses showed love to his father-in-law, a non-Israelite, raising him to a position of leadership among the people of God. I think of how the Law of God embraces the stranger, foreigner, and alien in the midst of God's people and I think of how we see that fleshed out in the embrace of women like Rahab and Ruth and the critical role they play in the genealogy of our Savior.

Daniel embodies this love as well. His close relationship with the kings he serves is well-attested in the chapters we read today. When Nebuchadnezzar has a dream, Daniel is the man he calls on. It's important to note that Nebuchadnezzar even uses Daniel's Jewish name which is highly unusual as the Babylonians "renamed" people in order to assimilate them fully into Babylonian culture. "And then Daniel came in. His Babylonian name is Belteshazzar, named after my god, a man full of the divine Holy Spirit. I told him my dream." (Daniel 4:8 MSG) And Daniel clearly communicates his love and concern for Nebuchadnezzar as he interprets the dream for him. "At first Daniel, who had been renamed Belteshazzar in Babylon, was upset. The thoughts that came swarming into his mind terrified him. "Belteshazzar," the king said, "stay calm. Don't let the dream and its interpretation scare you." "My master," said Belteshazzar, "I wish this dream were about your enemies and its interpretation for your foes." (Daniel 4:19 MSG)

Daniel's special relationship with the kings he serves is not limited to Nebuchadnezzar. It extends to Darius as well. "But Daniel, brimming with spirit and intelligence, so completely outclassed the other vice-regents and governors that the king decided to put him in charge of the whole kingdom." (Daniel 6:1-3 MSG) Clearly, Daniel's reputation precedes him. He is esteemed above all the wise men and satraps and other potential counselors of the king. Furthermore, when their jealousy gets the best of them and they craft legislation specifically attacking Daniel's faith, Darius laments what he has to do and is the first to arrive at the mouth of the lion's den to see if Daniel has survived. "The king was very upset and tried his best to get Daniel out of the fix he'd put him in. He worked at it the whole day long... The king then went back to his palace. He refused supper. He couldn't sleep. He spent the night fasting. At daybreak the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. As he approached the den, he called out anxiously, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve so loyally, saved you from the lions?" "O king, live forever!" said Daniel. "My God sent his angel, who closed the mouths of the lions so that they would not hurt me. I've been found innocent before God and also before you, O king. I've done nothing to harm you." When the king heard these words, he was happy. He ordered Daniel taken up out of the den. When he was hauled up, there wasn't a scratch on him. He had trusted his God. Then the king commanded that the conspirators who had informed on Daniel be thrown into the lions' den, along with their wives and children. Before they hit the floor, the lions had them in their jaws, tearing them to pieces." (Daniel 6:14, 18-24 MSG)

One can see from such verses how Daniel loved the lost kings whom he served. He loved them as God loved them. He served them out of reverence for Christ. He gave his life to them in an effort to lead and direct them to a saving faith. And his efforts were not in vain. Nebuchadnezzar gave glory to the God

of Israel. Belshazzar was brought to his knees before the God of Israel. Darius issues a proclamation that all the people of the empire would worship the God of Israel. It's a powerful testimony and example to us all.

So...how do you love the lost? Take it one step back...do you love the lost? Do you love those who do not know Christ or do you look down on them? Do you love those who are still enslaved to their sin or do you disdain them? Do you love those who are struggling and wandering and perhaps even living in willful rebellion against Christ or do you seek to reach them, serve them, care for them, have compassion on them? What creates barriers to love in your life? Is it politics? Ethnicity? Economics? Is it lack of forgiveness? Lack of grace? Lack of understanding? Is it anger? Frustration? Lost hope? Let the gospel minister to your soul. Let the gospel restore your faith and renew your love. Remember the gospel is the literal power of God for all those who would believe, Jew and Gentile alike. It is God's desire that all should be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. This includes even those we would consider our enemies. Let Daniel's example both challenge and inspire you today to reach out to those who do not yet know Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 7-9

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September 15, 2023
Hope for the Future

Readings for today: Daniel 7-9 (audio reading)

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

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

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

"Thrones were set in place and The Old One sat down. His robes were white as snow, his hair was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, its wheels blazing. A river of fire poured out of the throne. Thousands upon thousands served him, tens of thousands attended him. The courtroom was called to order, and the books were opened...My dream continued. "I saw a human form, a son of man, arriving in a whirl of clouds. He came to The Old One and was presented to him. He was given power to rule—all the glory of royalty. Everyone—race, color, and creed—had to serve him. His rule would be forever, never ending. His kingly rule would never be replaced." (Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 MSG) Forget the four great beasts. Forget the visions of lions and eagles and bears. Rams and goats thundering towards one another across the earth. Forget the terrifying beast with ten horns or the little horn with the big mouth. The focus of Daniel's vision is on the One called the Ancient of Days. The One who reigns and rules over it all. Pure as driven snow. Engulfed in holy fire. Tens of thousands at his beck and call. He judges the earth. He judges kings and rulers. He holds all dominion and power in His hand. And He calls to the Son of Man. Out of the clouds of heaven comes the Christ and He is given all authority on heaven and on earth. All peoples and nations and tribes and tongues shall serve him. His

kingdom shall never end. This is the main point of the vision Daniel receives. God letting his beloved prophet know He is not done. There is still hope. There will come a day when Christ shall come and all things shall be set right and made new.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 10-12

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September 16, 2023
Spiritual Warfare

Readings for today: Daniel 10-12 (audio reading)

I will confess that I do not take spiritual warfare as seriously as I should. I am usually blissfully ignorant on some level of the battle being waged in other dimensions for the future of our world and the state of my soul. Yes, I acknowledge there is a real, personal Satan. Yes, I acknowledge his demonic forces are constantly on the attack, seeking to tear me down and that which God loves in my life. Yes, I am fully aware of the many angles the Evil One uses to tempt me or distract me or make me afraid. But in my day to day, I don't give it as much thought as I should. In my daily prayer life, I don't give it as much attention as I should. And that's why passages like the one we read from Daniel today hit me so hard.

“During those days, I, Daniel, went into mourning over Jerusalem for three weeks. I ate only plain and simple food, no seasoning or meat or wine. I neither bathed nor shaved until the three weeks were up. On the twenty-fourth day of the first month I was standing on the bank of the great river, the Tigris. I looked up and to my surprise saw a man dressed in linen with a belt of pure gold around his waist. His body was hard and glistening, as if sculpted from a precious stone, his face radiant, his eyes bright and penetrating like torches, his arms and feet glistening like polished bronze, and his voice, deep and resonant, sounded like a huge choir of voices...I heard his voice. At the sound of it I fainted, fell flat on the ground, face in the dirt. A hand touched me and pulled me to my hands and knees. “‘Daniel,’ he said, ‘man of quality, listen carefully to my message. And get up on your feet. Stand at attention. I’ve been sent to bring you news.’” When he had said this, I stood up, but I was still shaking. “‘Relax, Daniel,’ he continued, ‘don’t be afraid. From the moment you decided to humble yourself to receive understanding, your prayer was heard, and I set out to come to you. But I was waylaid by the angel-prince of the kingdom of Persia and was delayed for a good three weeks. But then Michael, one of the chief angel-princes, intervened to help me. I left him there with the prince of the kingdom of Persia. And now I’m here to help you understand what will eventually happen to your people. The vision has to do with what’s ahead.’” (Daniel 10:2-6, 9-14 MSG)

Daniel mourns over the state of his nation. He mourns over the fate of Jerusalem. He mourns for the pain and suffering of his people. In his mourning, God sends a comforter. A divine messenger to give Daniel hope for the future. But that divine messenger is hindered in his ability to bring Daniel comfort by the work of the Enemy. As powerful as he is as a heavenly being, he faced enemies equally as powerful in the heavenly places. Spiritual forces of evil who waylaid him to prevent him from accomplishing his mission. Thankfully, God sent an even more powerful heavenly warrior to help him which allowed him to continue on his way. It's one of the few detailed accounts we have in Scripture of the heavenly battle that is happening all around us all the time.

This is why there is so much language in the New Testament about actively resisting the Enemy so he will flee. Taking up the whole armor of God in order to defend ourselves. Praying always in the Spirit. Immersing ourselves in the Word. Raising the shield of faith to protect not only ourselves but those around us. This is why the Apostle Paul tells us the weapons of our warfare are not of this world but mighty in God. With them, we are able to tear down every stronghold and every high thing that sets itself up against God. We are able to take our stand against the devil and his demonic forces. We are able to drive back the powers of darkness with the light of the gospel. But none of that happens unless we get on our knees in prayer. Unless we intercede with weeping and fasting as Daniel did over the state of our loved ones, the state of our families, the state of our nation, and the state of our world.

Friends, the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was to convince the Western world he didn't exist. Don't fall into the trap of believing you are safe from his attacks. As I read from another author recently, "I want to live my life in such a way that when I get out of bed in the morning, the devil says, "Oh hell! He's up!" (Steve Maraboli)

Readings for tomorrow: None

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September 18, 2023
Trust in God's Sovereignty

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 36:22-23, Ezra 1-3 (audio reading)

It's so easy to get discouraged these days, especially when it comes to politics. Leaders across the spectrum seem far less interested in serving the people and far more interested in accumulating wealth and power and influence and control. The corruption seems endless. The hypocrisy is blatant. Lies and deceit are the stock-in-trade. This disease is terminal and infects politicians across the ideological spectrum. None are blameless. None are immune. In fact, if you ask me, they all look and sound eerily similar to me which makes things seem even more hopeless. They are two sides to the same rotten coin and it's hard not to become fatalistic. Adding to my frustration is my firsthand experience in the developing world where the biggest barrier to bringing peace and stability and a chance for greater prosperity is the political leadership of the country. I cannot tell you how many times I have looked into the eyes of someone who is suffering from unnecessary starvation, easily treatable disease, or who has been falsely imprisoned and tortured as a direct result of the corrupt political leadership of their country.

I imagine the ancient Jewish people must have felt much the same. Especially given their condition in exile. But then comes along Cyrus the Great. "Great" not because he's godly but because he's the most powerful man in the world. His empire spans continents. His military is unstoppable. He crushes former world powers under his feet. Babylon is merely the latest of his victims. But as powerful as Cyrus may be, he recognizes there is a power much greater than his own. A power not of this world that he must appease. He acknowledges God as the Lord of heaven and earth and he does what he can to right the wrongs of the empires who have come before him. Now there is no indication in the text that Cyrus comes to saving faith. Nothing in the text to suggest that he cares for the Jewish people. He simply wants to honor the gods of the different people groups over which he now holds sway. He wants to win their favor in order to accumulate even more power and wealth and influence. In this way, Cyrus is no different than our leaders today. He sees faith as a means to a selfish end.

Thankfully, God is not limited to perfect vessels as He seeks to bring about His sovereign will. He uses the weak things of this world to confront the strong. He uses the foolish things of this world to confound the wise. He even bends the wills of the pagan kings of this world to accomplish his plans. Listen to how Solomon puts it in the Book of Proverbs, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will." (Proverbs 21:1 ESV) Friends, God is not done with our world. He is at work in every nation on earth. He is bending the will of even the most corrupt and the most greedy and the most power-hungry to His perfect ends. Yes, it may take much longer than we would always like. Yes, it may not happen in the way we would always prefer. But God is faithful! God never fails! He will bring to completion the good work of redemption He began in this world the moment Adam and Eve fell into sin. He will use all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. He will fulfill His promises to us. All He asks is for us to trust Him, believe Him, and humble ourselves before Him. There is coming a day when every wrong will be made right and every hurt will be healed and every injustice will be redressed.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 4-6

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September 19, 2023
Godly Leadership

Readings for today: Ezra 4-6 (audio reading)

Godly leaders keep their eyes focused on God. They are committed to walking in His ways and obeying His commands no matter how high the cost may be in this world. They refuse to bow the knee to pressure or threats or persecution. They resist the temptation to give in or respond in kind. They are not passively submissive but engage in active resistance, recognizing God cares as much about the “means” as He does the “ends.”

Haggai and Zechariah were godly leaders. They provided encouragement and direction at a time in Israel’s life when they needed it the most. The exiles had returned from Babylon. They were re-establishing their life in the Promised Land. In addition to rebuilding homes and re-planting fields and re-establishing their businesses, they also had undertaken the great work of rebuilding their Temple. The locals wanted to help out. They wanted to play a part. They wanted to assimilate with these newcomers. Tragically, however, they had merged some of the sacred rituals of the Jewish religion with some of their traditional pagan practices. Not only that but they had intermarried with non-Jews thus corrupting their identity as God’s chosen people so Haggai and Zechariah and the other leaders for Israel rejected their offer. They were faithful to obey the covenant commands of God.

One of the things that strikes me most about our reading today is that while Haggai and Zechariah resisted the pressure to conform to culture, they also resisted the temptation to go to war with culture. They didn’t assemble the army and wipe out or enslave the local population. They didn’t try to dominate or control those who opposed them. They simply pursued the truth and they did it in a way that was consistent with the laws of the empire. Their opponents lobbied the emperor to stop the work. They lobbied the emperor to complete the work. Their opponents put all kinds of obstacles in their way. They worked hard to overcome those obstacles and continued to build. It’s a great picture of how to engage our own culture today.

We live in a culture that is becoming increasingly hostile to the gospel. Different Christians are choosing to respond in different ways. Some Christians want to withdraw from culture. They want to retreat into their own cloistered communities and not engage society at all. Some Christians want to dominate culture. They want to fight our culture on every front and re-establish Christian hegemony over the laws of the land. Still other Christians understand their call to be a faithful witness much like Haggai and Zechariah. They are committed to active, non-violent resistance to the pagan cultural forces that swirl around us without trying to control or dominate their neighbors. They are committed to continuing the work God has called them to no matter what pressure or opposition may come. I truly believe this last approach is the best approach and helps us follow in the footsteps of godly leaders like Haggai and Zechariah.

Readings for tomorrow: Haggai 1-2

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September 20, 2023
God and Money

Readings for today: Haggai 1-2 (audio reading)

“Well, the God I believe in isn’t short of cash, mister.” - Bono

Why does God care about our money? Why does He care about how much we make and how much we give? Why does God care about what each individual does with his or her wealth? Why does God care what the nations do with their wealth? Surely He doesn’t need it. Surely our currency holds no value in His Kingdom where the streets are literally paved with gold. Surely gold, silver, coins, and cash are worthless in a place where there is no need or lack or want. So why does God talk so much about money throughout the Bible? Why does God say things like He does today in our reading from Haggai,

“‘I own the silver, I own the gold.’ Decree of God-of-the-Angel-Armies.” (Haggai 2:8 MSG)

God cares about money because He cares about us. He cares about what money and wealth does to our hearts. He cares about what happens to us when we acquire too much, too quickly without having the spiritual maturity to handle it. He cares about us clinging to it. Trusting in it. Finding our safety and security in what we make or what we save or what we own. The love of money is one of the primary competitors to the love of God which is why the Bible calls it the “root of all kinds of evil.” The people in Haggai’s day delayed the rebuilding of the Temple because of a perceived lack of resources. God, however, knew better. Listen again to what He says, “A Message from God-of-the-Angel-Armies: “The people procrastinate. They say this isn’t the right time to rebuild my Temple, the Temple of God.” Shortly after that, God said more and Haggai spoke it: “How is it that it’s the ‘right time’ for you to live in your fine new homes while the Home, God’s Temple, is in ruins?” And then a little later, God-of-the-Angel-Armies spoke out again: “Take a good, hard look at your life. Think it over. You have spent a lot of money, but you haven’t much to show for it. You keep filling your plates, but you never get filled up. You keep drinking and drinking and drinking, but you’re always thirsty. You put on layer after layer of clothes, but you can’t get warm. And the people who work for you, what are they getting out of it? Not much— a leaky, rusted-out bucket, that’s what.” That’s why God-of-the-Angel-Armies said: “Take a good, hard look at your life. Think it over.” (Haggai 1:2-7 MSG) The people in Haggai’s day had put the proverbial cart before the horse. They tried to provide for themselves rather than rely on God. They put their physical needs before their need to worship. They built fine homes and ate fine meals and drank fine wines while the work on the Temple languished. The problem was not a lack of resources but mixed up priorities.

We face the same struggle in our own day and time. The human heart hasn’t changed much over the years. We are still so easily tempted to fall in love with money. To place our trust in our own resources. To find our security in our wealth. This is especially true in a capitalistic society which prizes the pursuit of wealth and the accumulation of resources above just about everything else. Again, the issue isn’t money per se nor is it wealth per se, it’s what the accumulation of these things does to our hearts that puts us in grave spiritual danger. And this is why God is so quick to remind us that He owns it all. He owns all the silver and all the gold. He owns all the money and all the stock and all the bonds and all the banks on the earth. He is the one who holds all the resources of creation in His hands.

When we adopt this understanding, we are set free. Free to give generously and sacrificially of all we have to help those around us. Free to offer all we have in service to the Lord for the expansion of His Kingdom. Free to place our trust in the Lord for our provision rather than worry and fret over the state

of our 401k. This is how God wants us to live and it is why He claims all things - including our money - as His own.

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 1-7

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September 21, 2023
God Remembers

Readings for today: Zechariah 1-7 (audio reading)

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

“Give to the people this Message from God-of-the-Angel-Armies: ‘Come back to me and I’ll come back to you...’ (Zechariah 1:3 MSG)

“God reassured the Angel-Messenger—good words, comforting words—who then addressed me: “Tell them this. Tell them that God-of-the-Angel-Armies has spoken. This is God’s Message: ‘I care deeply for Jerusalem and Zion. I feel very possessive of them...’ (Zechariah 1:13-15 MSG)

“I’ve come back to Jerusalem, but with compassion this time.” This is God speaking. “I’ll see to it that my Temple is rebuilt.” A Decree of God-of-the-Angel-Armies! “The rebuilding operation is already staked out.” Say it again—a Decree of God-of-the-Angel-Armies: “My cities will prosper again, God will comfort Zion again, Jerusalem will be back in my favor again.” (Zechariah 1:16-17 MSG)

“Jerusalem will burst its walls—bursting with people, bursting with animals. And I’ll be right there with her’—God’s Decree—‘a wall of fire around unwallled Jerusalem and a radiant presence within.’ (Zechariah 2:4-5 MSG)

“Shout and celebrate, Daughter of Zion! I’m on my way. I’m moving into your neighborhood!” God’s Decree. “Many godless nations will be linked up with God at that time. (“They will become my family! I’ll live in their homes!”) And then you’ll know for sure that God-of-the-Angel-Armies sent me on this mission. God will reclaim his Judah inheritance in the Holy Land. He’ll again make clear that Jerusalem is his choice.”(Zechariah 2:10-12 MSG)

“This is God’s Message to Zerubbabel: ‘You can’t force these things. They only come about through my Spirit,’ says God-of-the-Angel-Armies. (Zechariah 4:6 MSG)

““A Message from God-of-the-Angel-Armies. Be alert. We have a man here whose name is Branch. He will branch out from where he is and build the Temple of God. Yes, he’s the one. He’ll build the Temple of God. Then he’ll assume the role of royalty, take his place on the throne and rule—a priest sitting on the throne!—showing that king and priest can coexist in harmony.” (Zechariah 6:12-13 MSG)

These are among the most glorious promises Israel has ever received. They speak of honor and blessing and restoration. They refer to the rebuilding of the Temple. The restoration of the priesthood. The glory of the worship that will once again fill the Lord’s house. God is raising up political leaders like Zerubbabel and religious leaders like Joshua to guide and direct God’s people to carry out the work God has planned for them. They will again be a light to the nations and will bless the people of the

earth. Every obstacle that might rise in their path, God Himself will lay low. Most of all, God's name will once again receive the glory it deserves.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 8-14

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September 22, 2023
The Coming Messiah

Readings for today: Zechariah 8-14 (audio reading)

Anyone who is familiar at all with the gospel story will recognize the Messianic prophecies embedded throughout Zechariah's visions. This is a critical reminder of the importance of the Old Testament. We have to see and understand the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the climax of a story that has been unfolding for centuries. Jesus is the true fulfillment of the covenant God first established with Abraham. He is the true seed. The promised Son. The faithful Israelite. He is the perfect embodiment of God's eternal plan and its fulfillment. Throughout the Old Testament, as God interacted with His people, He dropped clues as to what was coming. The "Day of the Lord" it was often called. A day when the Messiah would come and Israel would be saved. The people of God looked for this day. Longed for this day. Prayed for this day. Especially in periods of great hardship and suffering. So again, Zechariah is prophesying at a time of great change and upheaval. Decades of exile and slavery has come to an end. The people have survived Babylon. They've survived attempts at genocide. They've survived attempts to forcefully assimilate them into a broader, pagan culture. And now they've returned home. To a ruined city. To ruined homes. To a ruined Temple. Time to start over. Where will life go from here? Will God remain faithful? What life will they build? These are the fundamental questions they're asking and God sends Haggai, Nehemiah, Ezra, and Zechariah - among others - with the answer...

"Shout and cheer, Daughter Zion! Raise your voice, Daughter Jerusalem! Your king is coming! a good king who makes all things right, a humble king riding a donkey, a mere colt of a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9 MSG)

"Then I addressed them: "Pay me what you think I'm worth." They paid me an insulting sum, counting out thirty silver coins. God told me, "Throw it in the poor box." This stingy wage was all they thought of me and my work! So I took the thirty silver coins and threw them into the poor box in God's Temple." (Zechariah 11:12-13 MSG)

"Next I'll deal with the family of David and those who live in Jerusalem. I'll pour a spirit of grace and prayer over them. They'll then be able to recognize me as the One they so grievously wounded—that piercing spear-thrust! And they'll weep—oh, how they'll weep! Deep mourning as of a parent grieving the loss of the firstborn child." (Zechariah 12:10 MSG)

All these words - often quoted or alluded to throughout the New Testament - remind us God is in control. God reigns sovereign over all the earth. His plan is being worked out. His purposes are coming to pass. His will is being done on earth as it is in heaven. So until that great Day comes, what should then we do? Cling to hope. Cling to faith. Cling to God. He will never let us down. His promises are sure. His faithfulness is great. His steadfast love is loyal and true. The Lord is our God. We are His people. When we call on Him, He will answer. When we knock, the door is always open. When we've sinned, there is always grace. Believe this for your life today!

Readings for tomorrow: Esther 1-5

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September 23, 2023
The Strength of Women

Readings for today: Esther 1-5 (audio reading)

I love the women of the Bible. They live in incredibly difficult times. They live in cultures where they are treated more as property than people. They are subject to all kinds of abuse and neglect. They have no rights and no legal recourse. They are prized for their physical beauty and cast aside when it fades. Their worth is determined by the number of male children they bear and they are shamed if they cannot produce. It's a brutal, harsh existence and it would be easy for the women to throw up their hands in despair. It would be easy for them to feel helpless and hopeless. Resign themselves to their lot in life and try to make the best of things. But then you read stories about women like Vashti and Esther. Women who are powerful. Fierce. Courageous. Bold. They dare to stand up to the men in their lives. They dare to be different. They refuse to accept the social and cultural restraints placed upon them.

One of the common mistakes we make when we read the Bible is to assume that because every word is "inspired" it must mean every word has God's endorsement. For example, I've seen our passage from today used to support all sorts of misogynist thinking. Rather than celebrate Queen Vashti's courage for refusing to bow down to the drunken wishes of an abusive king, they take the king's side. They worry that Vashti's example will cause all women to "look on their husbands with contempt" or they use Esther 1:22 where it talks about "every man being master in his own household" as a proof text for hierarchical notions of spiritual leadership. Such thinking is toxic and betrays a lack of understanding on how to appropriately interpret Scripture. Nowhere in the text does the king's behavior receive God's endorsement. In fact, God isn't mentioned a single time in the entire book! The reason this book is included in the Bible is to teach us how God often works behind the scenes through the courage of His people. People He strategically places in pagan cultures to carry out His sovereign will. People like Esther for example. "The king fell in love with Esther far more than with any of his other women or any of the other virgins—he was totally smitten by her. He placed a royal crown on her head and made her queen in place of Vashti. Then the king gave a great banquet for all his nobles and officials —"Esther's Banquet." He proclaimed a holiday for all the provinces and handed out gifts with royal generosity." (Esther 2:17-18 MSG) It's important to note the king's lecherous behavior never seems to change. He is a man driven by unrestrained passions. As such, he is vulnerable to all sorts of manipulation. Left on his own, he would have killed all the Jews in his empire. But thankfully God was at work! Behind the scenes. Under the radar. Hidden from view. He orchestrates things in such a way that Esther is placed on the throne. And though she presumably has to endure some of the same abuse her predecessor Vashti did, she leverages her position to save her people.

We still live in a world full of abuse. A world where women are often dismissed, neglected, or ignored. A world where women are not treated as equals. They often do not receive equal pay or equal access or equal opportunity. Their rights are now being further eroded as more and more men identify as women. I know some men who are intimidated by strong women. I know some men who are afraid of strong women. I know some men who weaponize Scripture in order to subjugate women. Thankfully, Scripture itself attests to the truth that women are made in the image of God. Women are co-heirs to the Kingdom of God. Women are co-equals in the eyes of God. Furthermore, Scripture gives us example after example of women of deep faith who courageously buck their traditional cultural roles as they seek to serve and honor God. Jesus Himself affirmed the women who sacrificed everything to follow Him. They were among His first and most faithful disciples. I myself have been incredibly blessed to be married to a strong, godly woman and to be raising three strong, godly daughters. For the Christian,

“there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male or female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28)

Readings for tomorrow: None

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September 25, 2023
Where is God?

Readings for today: Esther 6-10 (audio reading)

One of the striking things about the Book of Esther is that there is no mention of God. In fact, some have used this to argue it should be stricken from the Biblical canon. God's fingerprints, however, are all over the book as it tells yet another story of the salvation of the Jews. It's a prime example of how God orchestrates things according to His sovereign will, using even pagan kings and emperors to bring His plans to pass. It reminds me of the story of Joseph and how what human beings so often plan for evil, God plans for good. It reminds me also of what the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8 about God working all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

We see this principle clearly on display in Esther and Mordecai's life. Esther is the right age and station to be caught up in the search for a new queen. Despite the clear intent on the part of the king to exploit yet another young woman, Esther achieves a very high and respected status, eventually accumulating great power and authority in her own right. Due to Mordecai's faithful resistance in refusing to bow before anyone but God, he is targeted with assassination along with all of his people. However, God places him at the right place at the right time to foil a plot against the king. Furthermore, God brings the act to the attention of the king at just the right moment when things seem at their most bleak and Mordecai's fate is dramatically changed. One can choose to see these things as random events, sheer coincidence that have nothing to do with God but I beg to differ and so does the Biblical author of Esther. The whole point of this book is explain the deeper meaning behind the celebration Purim as God once again intervenes - though in a hidden way - to rescue His people from certain destruction.

One of the most common questions I get as a pastor is, "Where is God?" Where is God when it hurts? Where is God when I suffer? Where is God when my loved one dies? Where is God when the world seems so full of violence and pain? Where is God in the face of evil? These are hard but important questions and Esther provides at least one potential answer. God is there all along, orchestrating things behind the scenes if we have the eyes to see Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Malachi 1-4, Psalm 50

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September 26, 2023
The Importance of Worship

Readings for today: Malachi 1-4, Psalm 50 (audio reading)

Human beings are worshiping creatures. The earliest records of the human race depict scenes of worship. We will worship just about anything given the right set of circumstances. We will worship animals. We will worship trees. We will worship the land and the ocean. We will worship money and sex and power. We will worship authority. We will worship other human beings. We will even make up our own gods to worship to fill in the gaps of our lives. It's one of the traits that sets us apart from any other creature in the world. We crave a connection with transcendence. We want a relationship with the eternal. The catch is that we want it on our terms. We want to be in control. We refuse to bow the knee to any higher power that doesn't "do for us" if we "do for them." And that's our problem with God.

Malachi indicts God's people for making a mockery of true worship. Instead of worshiping God in His terms, they worship God on their terms. They defile the altar. They bring the leftovers and the rejects from their flocks to sacrifice. They refuse to give the required tithes. Their priests ignore the truth. They play at religion, going through the motions as if it didn't matter. But God will not be mocked. He refuses to play their game. He judges them with righteousness and the verdict is "guilty." Listen again to what God says to His people through the prophet, "Instead of honoring me, you profane me. You profane me when you say, 'Worship is not important, and what we bring to worship is of no account,' and when you say, 'I'm bored—this doesn't do anything for me.' You act so superior, sticking your noses in the air—act superior to me, God-of-the-Angel-Armies! And when you do offer something to me, it's a hand-me-down, or broken, or useless. Do you think I'm going to accept it? This is God speaking to you." (Malachi 1:12-13 MSG)

As a pastor in the American church context, I can't tell you the number of times I've had conversations with Christians that reflect the same sentiment above. Believers who've been in worship their whole lives who begin to profane it by ignoring it or diminishing it or complaining about it. Excuses like, "I'm not being fed" or "they don't play the right music" or "worship doesn't do anything for me" are tossed around ad nauseam these days. Add to that the number of preachers who have exchanged the truth of God for the latest social/political commentary and the number of believers who refuse to sacrificially give and one can easily see why the church in America is so weak. God has withdrawn His favor. He simply will not bless our consumeristic approach to the gospel. He refuses to allow Himself to become a commodity. He will not diminish Himself or His glory to accommodate our self-centered worship. He calls us higher. He calls us deeper. He calls us to humbly submit ourselves to Him and embrace the path He's laid out for us.

Friends, worshiping God in Spirit and in truth may be the most radical act of resistance the world has ever seen. When we gather to worship, we are taking our stand on the gospel and declaring to the world the coming of God's Kingdom. When we gather for worship, we find the dividing walls of hostility that keep us apart generationally, ethnically, socially, economically, politically, sexually, etc. being torn down as God's Spirit gives us new hearts and new minds built for the new world that is coming. When we gather for worship, we proclaim an end to evil, an end to sin, an end to death, and the final victory of Christ over all His enemies. This is why we worship, friends! And this is why God takes our worship so seriously.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 7-10

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September 27, 2023
Fasting and Prayer

Readings for today: Ezra 7-10 (audio reading)

The mission of God is impossibly large and complex. It is global. It is universal. It's reach spans the centuries. God will never rest until the gospel has been preached in every tongue to every tribe in every nation. He will never rest until all have the opportunity to come to a knowledge of His truth and be saved. He will never rest until every knee bows and every tongue confesses that He is Lord. And perhaps most amazingly of all, He entrusts this great work to His church. His people. Now, if you are like me, the task seems overwhelming. Where do we even begin? How can I even begin to marshal the resources and wisdom and strength accomplish this mission? I am so weak. I am so small. I am so insignificant. Where can I go to find what I need to do what the Lord has called me to do?

Much like Ezra, I begin with fasting and prayer. "I proclaimed a fast there beside the Ahava Canal, a fast to humble ourselves before our God and pray for wise guidance for our journey—all our people and possessions. I was embarrassed to ask the king for a cavalry bodyguard to protect us from bandits on the road. We had just told the king, "Our God lovingly looks after all those who seek him, but turns away in disgust from those who leave him." So we fasted and prayed about these concerns. And He listened." (Ezra 8:21-23 MSG) Fasting and prayer have been part of my life for many years now. The discipline of fasting reminds me of how empty and weak I am. It reminds me of my deep need for God. It makes me hungry for more of Him. More of His Word. More of His Spirit. The discipline of prayer is my connection to God. It is the ongoing conversation between my soul and God's Spirit from which I draw so much wisdom and strength.

God has promised so much to His people. He promises to feed those who are hungry. He promises to quench the thirst of those who seek Him. He promises to give wisdom to those who ask and strengthen those who are weak. He encourages us to cast all our anxieties on Him and to lay our worries at His feet. He loves to listen to our needs and wants and desires. He is a good and loving Father who does not give a stone to those who ask for bread or a snake to those who ask for fish. He wants us to seek. He wants us to ask. He wants us to knock. And He promises He will be found. He promises He will respond. He promises He will open the door to anyone who humbly comes before Him.

Why then is fasting and prayer a last resort for us? Why is it not the first step as it was for Ezra and his people? Why do we wait until we've exhausted our own strength and wisdom and effort before coming to God in fasting and prayer? Why do we try so often to go it alone? Is it pride? Is it fear? Is it selfishness? Is it a desire to prove ourselves? To demonstrate our independence? Maybe some combination of all of the above? God invites us into His presence. God invites us to draw on Him for all we need in this life. God invites us to taste and see His goodness and His glory. God invites us to lay hold of His power for His mission in this world. Take the first step today. Spend time fasting and praying and asking the Lord to show you His will and His way.

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 1-4

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September 28, 2023
Corporate Sin and Confession

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

The Bible makes it clear that sin is both individual and corporate. There are the sins I commit on a daily basis by the way I think, the way I speak, and the way I act. I am fully responsible for those sins and must confess them before a holy God so that I might receive forgiveness. But then there are the sins that I participate in - wittingly or unwittingly - that arise out of the “systems” in which I am embedded as a human being. For example, I am part of a family system. I have a spouse and children and I come from a family of origin that can often create all kinds of issues. So much of the counseling work I’ve done personally and professionally with others is focused on helping identify the generational sins that get passed down and how to break those patterns before they repeat themselves. In addition to a family system, I am part of a local social system in my community. We somewhat affectionately call it the “Parker bubble” and it impacts the way I think about life in both good and bad ways. I am also part of a political and economic system in the United States that frames my thinking both positively and negatively. And the list goes on and on. As a participant in these systems, I am at least partially responsible for propping up the system by the way I vote, spend money, participate and/or not participate in civic activities, etc. And therefore it is fully appropriate for me to confess the ways in which I contribute to a sinful, broken system and ask for forgiveness. This, by the way, is exactly what Nehemiah does in our passage for today.

“I said, “God, God-of-Heaven, the great and awesome God, loyal to his covenant and faithful to those who love him and obey his commands: Look at me, listen to me. Pay attention to this prayer of your servant that I’m praying day and night in intercession for your servants, the People of Israel, confessing the sins of the People of Israel. And I’m including myself, I and my ancestors, among those who have sinned against you. We’ve treated you like dirt: We haven’t done what you told us, haven’t followed your commands, and haven’t respected the decisions you gave to Moses your servant. All the same, remember the warning you posted to your servant Moses: ‘If you betray me, I’ll scatter you to the four winds, but if you come back to me and do what I tell you, I’ll gather up all these scattered peoples from wherever they ended up and put them back in the place I chose to mark with my Name.’” (Nehemiah 1:5-9 MSG)

Clearly, Nehemiah wasn’t personally responsible for the sins of his people. He wasn’t around when they rebelled against God and were exiled. He is generations removed from when the people followed Moses out of Egypt and into the wilderness. He isn’t even living in Jerusalem and participating in the current sins being committed by God’s people which we read about in Ezra. He’s in Babylon. He’s answered God’s call on his life to serve the king faithfully as cupbearer. He’s clearly got a tender heart for his people and conditions they find themselves living in. His heart is broken for the things that break God’s heart. He’s open to being used by God to change those conditions. Why then does he feel the need to confess? Why does he feel the need to confess the “sins of the People of Israel?” Nehemiah understands that sin has both an individual as well as corporate dimension. He understands he is personally responsible for his own sinful thoughts, attitudes, and actions AND he is responsible for participating in a communal system - the nation of Israel - that has collectively rebelled against God’s authority. He is not an island unto himself. In fact, Nehemiah probably didn’t think of himself as an individual first and part of a community second. Most people throughout history and even around the world today think far more communally than individualistically about life. And this is why he intercedes not just for himself but for his people.

What about us? How do you think about sin? When you spend time in confession before the Lord, do you include a confession of corporate sin? Perhaps it's the sin of your family system going back generations that continues to have a ripple effect in your life today. Perhaps it's the sin of your church family or your local community or our country. All of us are impacted by the sinful systems of the world around us and all of us participate and contribute to the perpetuation of those systems in some way, shape, or form. This is our confessional prayers must include both individual and corporate dimensions and thankfully God is faithful and just to forgive individuals but entire communities and people groups as well.

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 5-7

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September 29, 2023
The Call of the Gospel

Readings for today: Nehemiah 5-7 (audio reading)

The call of the gospel is to lay down our lives for others. To do as Jesus did. Jesus is God. As such, He could have chosen to hold onto His divine right to rule. His divine right to reign. His divine right to wield authority and power and compel obedience. But Jesus relinquished those rights. He laid them aside. Taking on the form of a servant. He became obedient even unto death. And not just any death but the most humiliating, degrading death possible. Death on a cross. At any time, He could have called down legions of angels to crush His enemies. At any time, He could have taken back up His authority and destroyed His enemies. But Jesus relinquished His rights because He had a greater prize in mind...the approval of His Heavenly Father. Jesus put no stock in the ways of this world. The accolades of this world. The kingdoms of this world. The treasures of this world. He placed no value on anything this world had to offer and instead looked to the world to come for His hope. This is why His Father exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name above every name. His willingness to lay everything down in humble obedience to His Father's will was vindicated by His resurrection, ascension, and exaltation.

I see Christ in Nehemiah. A man who was willing to relinquish his rights and lay everything down for the sake of God's people. A man who put service to His nation above his own well-being. He had every right to demand tribute as governor. He had every right to levy taxes and exact a heavy toll on his constituents. He had every right to demand a portion of the interest the wealthy had placed on the poor. But he gave all that up and by doing so, set a godly example before the people. "From the time King Artaxerxes appointed me as their governor in the land of Judah—from the twentieth to the thirty-second year of his reign, twelve years—neither I nor my brothers used the governor's food allowance. Governors who had preceded me had oppressed the people by taxing them forty shekels of silver (about a pound) a day for food and wine while their underlings bullied the people unmercifully. But out of fear of God I did none of that. I had work to do; I worked on this wall. All my men were on the job to do the work. We didn't have time to line our own pockets. I fed 150 Jews and officials at my table in addition to those who showed up from the surrounding nations. One ox, six choice sheep, and some chickens were prepared for me daily, and every ten days a large supply of wine was delivered. Even so, I didn't use the food allowance provided for the governor—the people had it hard enough as it was. Remember in my favor, O my God, Everything I've done for these people." (Nehemiah 5:14-19 MSG) And how did the people respond to such godly leadership? The rich forgave the debts of the poor. Land was restored to their rightful owners. Interest was no longer accrued. The people were set free. Such acts of generosity were a sign to everyone that God was in their midst.

What about us? We live in a nation consumed with selfishness and greed. Everyone seems out to get "theirs." Everyone is concerned about protecting their "rights." Everyone wants justice. The problem is we don't all share the same view of justice. We believe all truth is relative. We all want an equal share but often refuse to make equal sacrifice. Too many feel entitled to what they have rather than view it as a gift from God. Too many do all they can to protect what they have rather than walk with open hands. Too many hoard all they have rather than give generously. And here I am just talking about the Christians! The very people who claim to follow Christ! Imagine how the reputation of the church would change if we got serious about following the example of our Savior and laid down our lives for others? Imagine how the world would change if the church would relinquish her rights and instead sought to serve? Imagine how many lives would be saved if we truly embraced the heart of the gospel like Nehemiah and so many others who have gone before us?

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 8-10

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September 30, 2023
The Power of God's Word

Readings for today: Nehemiah 8-10 (audio reading)

A friend of mine asked me a great question the other day, “Why do Christians preach?” Why not just feed the hungry, care for the sick, or lift up the poor? Why not just engage in good works across the world and let those things stand for themselves? Why not gather week after week to sing which is far more participatory than listening to one person speak for 30 minutes or more? Why not prep videos and encourage smaller groups of people to study the Bible together so you can focus on fellowship on Sunday mornings? When you think about, there are so many other things we could organize our life around as Christians and yet preaching has always been an essential part of what we gather to do.

God's Word is powerful. It is no ordinary book. These aren't just everyday stories. They are not just words on a page. There is power in God's Word and when it is preached that power becomes available to us. It convicts us of sin. It lifts up our hearts. It connects us with God Himself for this is His Word to us. We see this on display in our passage from Nehemiah today. Ezra is asked to preach the Word of God. To read the Revelation of God to His people and revival breaks out. The people of God are convicted to the core and they respond by recommitting themselves in faith to the Lord. It's a powerful reminder of what happens when God's people come with an eagerness to hear God's Word and an openness to God's Spirit. Listen again to how Nehemiah describes it...

“So Ezra the priest brought The Revelation to the congregation, which was made up of both men and women—everyone capable of understanding. It was the first day of the seventh month. He read it facing the town square at the Water Gate from early dawn until noon in the hearing of the men and women, all who could understand it. And all the people listened—they were all ears—to the Book of The Revelation. The scholar Ezra stood on a wooden platform constructed for the occasion. He was flanked on the right by Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah, and on the left by Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam. Ezra opened the book. Every eye was on him (he was standing on the raised platform) and as he opened the book everyone stood. Then Ezra praised God, the great God, and all the people responded, “Oh Yes! Yes!” with hands raised high. And then they fell to their knees in worship of God, their faces to the ground... On the second day of the month the family heads of all the people, the priests, and the Levites gathered around Ezra the scholar to get a deeper understanding of the words of The Revelation. They found written in The Revelation that God commanded through Moses that the People of Israel are to live in booths during the festival of the seventh month. So they published this decree and had it posted in all their cities and in Jerusalem: “Go into the hills and collect olive branches, pine branches, myrtle branches, palm branches, and any other leafy branches to make booths, as it is written...Ezra read from the Book of The Revelation of God each day, from the first to the last day—they celebrated the feast for seven days. On the eighth day they held a solemn assembly in accordance with the decree.” (Nehemiah 8:2-6, 13-15, 18 MSG)

We are a spiritually hungry people. The problem is we seek to satisfy that hunger and quench our deep, spiritual thirst with all the wrong things. We turn to social media, the latest fads or trends, money, exotic vacations, even mission tourism to try to find significance and satisfaction and a sense of purpose and meaning. Sometimes these things help but they provide temporary relief at best. What we need is to hear from God. What we need is a Word from the Lord. What we need is to sit under His teaching day after day, week after week, so we might better understand Him and how He made us and

what His plans are for us. This is why we preach. This is why we teach. This is why God's Word is at the center of Christian worship.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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