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April 1, 2024
Role Models

Readings for today: [2 Samuel 19-21, Psalms 92](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

There are some who look to David as a great role model for faith. They extol his virtues. They lift up the fact that he has a heart after God. He refuses to strike down the Lord's anointed. He is humble. He is charismatic. He is a leader for God's people. He is a song-writer. He is a poet. He is a warrior. Without a doubt, David is a gifted man. However, David is also a deeply flawed man. In many ways, he is a product of his culture just like we are products of our cultures. David is a classic ancient near east warlord. He uses violence to accomplish his goals. He is more than willing to sacrifice others in pursuit of his ends. He often takes matters into his own hands rather than listen to God. And he frequently refuses to accept responsibility for his actions. For example, he weeps over Absalom. While his grief is understandable, he never owns the fact that it was his actions - or inactions as it were - that led Israel to civil war. He refuses to hold Joab responsible for murdering one man after another. And when it comes to the matter of the Gibeonites, he seeks the Lord to find out the reason for the famine in the land but doesn't ask God how he should resolve it. Instead, he takes matters into his own hands and sacrifices seven men to atone for Saul's crimes. It's a classic pagan, ancient near east move.

Thankfully, God has provided a greater David to serve as our example. He has provided the perfect Man to follow and pattern our life after. While we can learn from the saints of the Bible, the only role model we should seek is Jesus. He reveals the perfect will of God for our lives. He shows us the perfect way to live. He never leads us astray. He is full of the grace and truth. He is the light and life of the world. Every single saint in the Old Testament longed for the day when Messiah would appear. Every single Christian in the New Testament looked to Christ not only as their Savior but as their Lord as well. He was the one they were to be like. Him and no other. Sadly, I see far too many ministries and far too many books and far too many conference speakers lifting up the flawed human beings of the Old and New Testaments as role models for the faith. Far too often, they use their sinful actions to justify their current social and political and personal beliefs. And, again, while I can appreciate their strengths as well as their weaknesses, the only person I am going to model my life after is the Person of Jesus. What about you?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 22-24, Psalms 93

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April 2, 2024
Real Salvation

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 22-24, Psalms 93 ([audio reading](#))

Salvation is real. It's based on real events within human history. It's an accurate record of God's miraculous intervention on behalf of His chosen people which is why it retains such a hold on our imaginations. When I was in seminary, I remember debating fellow students and even some of my professors over the nature of salvation. They believed the events of the Bible to be largely mythological. They believed salvation to be a spiritual metaphor describing the basic human longing for freedom or liberation. They couldn't conceive of a God who would act within history. They rejected the historicity of events like the Exodus or people like David or even the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. They began with the a priori philosophical assumption that miracles were impossible and therefore the Bible must be wrong or using hyperbole when it describes them. Everything must have a naturalistic or humanistic or scientific explanation. The problem with this approach is it doesn't adequately explain why events like the Exodus remain so influential over the centuries.

In today's reading, David composes a song of thanksgiving. It's a song commemorating his victories over all his enemies. David is finally at peace. He has won all his wars. He has secured his line of succession. He has united the nation of Israel under his rule. And he rightfully gives God all the glory. As he writes his poetry, he draws on the image of the Exodus to describe all God has done for him. "The Lord thundered from heaven; the Most High made his voice heard. He shot arrows and scattered them; he hurled lightning bolts and routed them. The depths of the sea became visible, the foundations of the world were exposed at the rebuke of the Lord, at the blast of the breath of his nostrils." (2 Samuel 22:14-16 CSB) He goes on to talk about God lifting him out of the deep waters to bring him to a safe place. He talks about God's deliverance from all his enemies and how God gave him victory after victory everywhere he went. Clearly, David has in mind specific battles in specific places against specific people. These are not abstract ideas. David isn't just talking about spiritual metaphors. He is talking about salvation in the literal sense. A real God acting on behalf of His people within real time and space. And David relates his own experiences to the experiences of God's people throughout their history.

The question I often posed to my fellow students and professors when we would debate is how we could honestly talk about God as "Savior" if He never actually saved anyone? Why would we call Him names like "Deliverer", "Rescuer", "Liberator", etc. if He wasn't actually engaged in the business of deliverance, rescue, and liberation? It's baffling to me that people would worship a god who never actually does anything. I am honestly stumped why anyone would seek to follow such a god? Why would we believe or trust anything this supposed god actually said? How is this not just wishful thinking? How is this not just blind hope? No, I worship a God who saves. I worship a God who delivers. I worship a God who parted the Red Sea, saved David from all his enemies, and raised Jesus Christ from the dead. I worship a God who still intervenes miraculously to save His people even today.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 1-3, Psalms 94

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April 3, 2024
Wisdom

Readings for today: 1 Kings 1-3, Psalms 94 [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

“So give your servant a receptive heart to judge your people and to discern between good and evil. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?” (1 Kings 3:9 CSB)

We suffer today from a lack of discernment. We live in a post-truth world. Right and wrong are personally defined. There is no such thing as objectivity anymore. People do what is right in their own eyes. We call good “evil” and evil “good.” We have lost our way as a culture, as a society, and as a nation. And it isn’t just Christians who have come to this conclusion. In one of the strangest videos I’ve ever seen, noted atheist Richard Dawkins actually calls himself a “cultural Christian” and argues for a return to Christian values in the UK! Craziness! Sadly, events of recent years like the COVID pandemic have only accelerated our downward spiral. Political and cultural leaders from all sides of the aisle seem far more interested in leveraging the multiple crises we face to further their own ends. We no longer seem to have many adults in the room. People who will honestly and transparently and humbly lead us through what is an extremely challenging time. The results are deadly. Would that God would raise up a leader for us like Solomon!

Sadly, in a democratic system, you often get the leadership you deserve. If we are honest, our leaders are an extension of us. They are the embodiment of our basest desires and primal instincts. They are ruthless, calculating, greedy, corrupt...just like us but on a larger scale. You say, but I’m not that way! Are you so sure? Perhaps it’s a matter of scale. It was Lord Acton who once wrote, “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” I imagine many of us - given the right circumstances and opportunities and resources and influence - might find ourselves justifying all kinds of choices we might not otherwise make. This is the impact of sin in our lives and it is hard to resist. This is why the character of a leader matters. It’s why the heart of leader is so important. Leaders who are humble and seek God, who are willing to acknowledge their mistakes and ask for forgiveness, will seek to serve rather than be served. They will seek to unite rather than divide. They will lead with honesty and integrity and the nation will be blessed. Leaders who are proud and arrogant, selfish and greedy, prone to violence and rage, will seek to serve themselves rather than others. They will use division to accumulate more and more power for themselves. They will lie and deceive routinely if it serves their ends and the nation will be cursed.

One of the things we will see as we read through the Kings is how the character of a leader shapes the nation. The fortunes of Israel rise or fall largely on the godliness of the kings who serve her. When godly kings are in power. Kings who are wise. Discerning. Those who know right from wrong and good from evil. Israel flourishes. When ungodly kings are in power. Kings who are corrupt. Foolish. Narcissistic. Those who could care less about right or wrong as long as they acquire more power. Israel falls. America is no different. Now, more than ever, we need godly leadership at the helm of our nation. Now, more than ever, the character of our leaders matters. May God raise up for us leaders like Solomon who know good from evil and can lead us with wisdom.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 4-7, Psalms 95

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April 4, 2024
Whose House are you Building?

Readings for today: 1 Kings 4-7, Psalms 95 ([audio reading](#))

Whose house are you building? Are you seeking to build God's house or your own? Where do you spend most of your time, attention, and resources? Today's reading challenges us. It presents a comparison between God's house and Solomon's house and forces us to come to ask some tough questions about our own lives as well.

No doubt, Solomon fulfilled his father's dream and built a magnificent Temple for the Lord. The project took seven years and took up a great deal of Solomon's time, energy, and resources. Several chapters are dedicated in the books of Kings and Chronicles to the Temple construction and the general consensus is that Solomon completed his task with excellence, building a house worthy of the Lord. At the same time, Scripture draws some important comparisons between the house built for the Lord and the house Solomon built for himself by laying these chapters side by side. Yes, Solomon took seven years to build God's house but he took thirteen to build his own. Yes, God's house was large, measuring some 90 feet long, 30 feet wide, and 45 feet high. However, Solomon's house was even bigger and more grand, measuring 150 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high. Each house was built of costly trimmed and dressed stone and covered in cedar beams. We know each building contained all kinds of gold and precious stones but once again, it seems Solomon used the bulk of his wealth on his own home. This suggests that for all of Solomon's devotion to the work of temple building, he was more devoted to his own glory than he was to the glory of the Lord.

Like Solomon, we too can become distracted and focus more on our own concerns than that of the Lord and His will for our lives. We can put more energy and time into our own pursuits than into worshipping and serving God. We can treat God as one priority among many rather than the first and most important priority of our lives. So, again, let me press the question. As you think about where you spend your time, energy, wealth, and resources...whose house are you building? Who is getting the bulk of your attention? Are you seeking first the Kingdom of God for your life or are you seeking your own kingdom?

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 8-10, Psalms 96

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April 5, 2024
Learning to Pray

Readings for today: 1 Kings 8-10, Psalms 96 [\(audio reading\)](#)

The prayer of King Solomon at the dedication of the Temple is one of my favorites. It serves as a great model for us as we think about our own prayer life or prayers during times of great cultural upheaval like the one we're currently living in. It begins with an ascription of praise for who God is and a recognition that He is utterly transcendent.

"Lord God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below, who keeps the gracious covenant with your servants who walk before you with all their heart." (1 Kings 8:23 CSB) Solomon acknowledges the greatness of God. His majesty. His glory. His splendor. He is not just one among many gods. He is alone is the true God of the heavens and the earth. He is also a God defined by faithfulness. Eternal loyalty. Steadfast love for His covenant people who are the humble recipients of His blessing. This attitude is truly the starting point of prayer. Prayer must begin with an understanding of who God is and who we are. We are not the same. We are not on the same level. God is the shepherd and we are the sheep. God is the potter and we are the clay. God is the king and we are his servants. Prayer place us in a humble position before the Lord. This is the only posture one can take when we come before God in prayer.

"But will God indeed live on earth? Even heaven, the highest heaven, cannot contain you, much less this temple I have built. Listen to your servant's prayer and his petition, Lord my God, so that you may hear the cry and the prayer that your servant prays before you today." (1 Kings 8:27-28 CSB) As we come humbly before the Lord, we are assured of His promise to hear us. To listen. To attend to our prayers. God hears every word. Every cry. He sees every tear. He knows the secret thoughts of our hearts and He delights when we bring those before Him openly and honestly. Solomon makes it clear that the Temple's primary purpose is to serve as a house for prayer. A place where Israel can come before God and lay their requests before Him.

God not only listens to our requests, He also hears our confession. Throughout this prayer, Solomon acknowledges the inescapable reality of sin. It is ubiquitous. It is epidemic. It is simply part of who we are as God's people. So when a man or woman sins. When God's people sin collectively. Whether against neighbor or friend. Through systems of oppression or abuse. When Israel suffers defeat at the hands of their enemies or the rains are shut up in the heavens or famine strikes the land. When viral pandemics rage, economies fail, racial tensions rise, and shelter-in-place orders are laid down. In those moments, if we will humble ourselves and pray and seek God's face, God promises to "hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive and act and render to each whose heart you know..." (1 Kings 8:39 CSB)

God will do all these things in such a way as to make His name great upon the earth. Even in Solomon's prayer, there is a missional, outward-facing component. "Even for the foreigner who is not of your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name — for they will hear of your great name, strong hand, and outstretched arm, and will come and pray toward this temple — may you hear in heaven, your dwelling place, and do according to all the foreigner asks. Then all peoples of earth will know your name, to fear you as your people Israel do and to know that this temple I have built bears your name." (1 Kings 8:41-43 CSB) God desires to fill the earth with His glory. Israel is called to serve this very purpose. In the way Israel orders her life and faithfully serves her Lord, she will be a witness to the nations and to all of creation of the steadfast love of God.

You can see why I love this prayer so much! As I said above, it is a great model for us to follow in our own lives as we ponder and reflect on the challenges we face individually and collectively. Passages like this invite us to bring our requests before the Lord and trust Him with the results. Because of Christ, Christians have access to the Father in ways Solomon, in all his wisdom, could never have imagined! Because Christ sits at the Father's right hand interceding for us continually, the door is always open. The way to the Holy of Holies always clear. We have a standing invitation to come before our Heavenly Father with the blessed assurance He will always listen. When you pray for yourself or the world in which we live, pray with this eternal promise firmly fixed in your mind and heart.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 11-13, Psalms 97

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April 6, 2024
Finishing Strong

Readings for today: 1 Kings 11-13, Psalms 97 (audio reading)

“When Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away to follow other gods. He was not wholeheartedly devoted to the Lord his God, as his father David had been.” (1 Kings 11:4 CSB)

A long obedience in the same direction. That’s how the late pastor and author and scholar, Eugene Peterson, once described the Christian life. It’s a path we choose to walk in this life under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It doesn’t translate into perfection. It doesn’t mean we will stop sinning. It doesn’t mean we will never put a foot out of line or wander down some rabbit trail. It simply means that on balance, we set the course of our lives towards one goal. One destination. One finish line and that is the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

As we read the Bible, we see so many start well but eventually fall. We see them raised up by God only to fall into sin later in their lives. We’ve seen it over and over again in the lives of Aaron and Miriam and Gideon and Samson and David and many others. We see it in Rehoboam and Jeroboam who both come after Solomon. We’ll see it in the lives of several kings over the next few weeks. The message is clear. It’s hard to finish strong. It’s hard to remain faithful. It’s hard to keep walking in obedience over the long haul in the same direction.

Solomon became distracted. He married hundreds of women in an attempt to build alliances with the nations around him and pacify the region. He was largely successful but he also became distracted from his most important calling as a king. He was to remain faithful to God and serve God’s people. Rehoboam grew up watching his father. He saw his dad enslave entire people groups. Build incredible cities. Amass great wealth and power. He wanted to do the same. In fact, like any spoiled child, he felt he was entitled to it. So he decided to become even more of a tyrant than his father. He too forgot his most important calling which was to remain faithful to God and serve God’s people. Jeroboam was anointed by God to be king after Solomon. He was literally given the vast majority of the nation of Israel. Ten tribes would go with him when he split the kingdom. But he became afraid. What would happen when they went back to the Temple in Jerusalem? Would they abandon him? Would they return to the line of David? Out of fear, he commits idolatry and sets up his own priestly system complete with its own sacrifices and shrines and temples and idols. He forgot his most calling which was to remain faithful to God and serve God’s people.

One of my most frequent prayers is to finish strong. I want to finish my life and my ministry in faithfulness. I don’t want there to be even a hint of scandal. I don’t want anyone to ever say Doug fell at the end. Started serving himself. Started drifting from his most important calling. Started loving other things more than he loved God. I’ve been blessed in my life with tremendous opportunities and tremendous resources and an incredible family and an amazing church to serve but I don’t ever want to take these things for granted. So I ask God with regularity to keep me humble. Keep me in my place. Help me to always have a heart to serve rather than be served and seek first His Kingdom above all. What about you?

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 14-16, Psalms 98 (No devotionals on Sundays)

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April 7, 2024 (no commentaries on Sunday)

Readings for today: [1 Kings 14-16, Psalms 98](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

April 8, 2024 God's Love for Widows

Readings for today: [1 Kings 17-19, Psalms 99](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

For most of my life, when I've read the story of Elijah, I tended to focus on his confrontation with King Ahab or his showdown with the prophets of Baal or his flight from Jezebel or perhaps most of all, his encounter with God on the mountain. However, in recent years, I've spent more time focusing on the widow of Zarephath. Reading her story reminds me of so many of the women I've met in places like Uganda and Ethiopia and Rwanda. Widows who spend their days gathering sticks into large bundles and carrying them on their backs to market. Day in and day out they do this work. Week after week. Month after month. Year after year until their bodies give out. They trade their labor for food or for a little cash. They barely make enough to eat much less save. They never take a day off. They never take a vacation. This is the kind of woman Elijah meets when he arrives in Zarephath. She takes time out from her back-breaking labor to bring him a drink. She willingly sacrifices her last bit of flour and oil - what was going to be her final meal with her son before they died - and gives it to Elijah to eat. Despite her suffering, she never wavers in showing hospitality to this man of God. It's awe-inspiring.

As I said, I've met this widow many times before and as I head over to Ethiopia this week, I imagine I will meet many more. I've spent time in their homes. I've shared meals with them. I've watched them prepare what little they have to entertain strangers from afar. I've been touched by their gracious hospitality. Despite the fact that they work all day, make two or three long trips to the local watering hole, finish their chores, feed their children and put them to bed; they still find time to serve. They still find time to love. I am convinced this is why God answers their prayers. I am convinced this is why God works miracles on their behalf. These widows have a simple, yet profound faith. They don't complain. They don't question. They don't have a bad attitude. They never make it about them. They are faithful. They are obedient. They trust the Lord and they are blessed.

How I wish I could be like these widows! How I wish I could live with such simple faith! They have become my teachers in so many ways. They have taught me to pray. They have taught me to worship. They have taught me to sing. They have taught me to dance. They have taught me how to serve and love and sacrifice for Jesus. When I follow their example, I find my eyes being lifted above the hills. My gaze fixes on Jesus as I realize I am in the presence of one of His very special, beloved children. The widows I've met are like "advance scouts" for the Kingdom of God. They are much further along in the journey than I am and Jesus is faithful to send them back to encourage me along the way. They are not just bit players in some other person's story...even if that person is Elijah himself! They are numbered among God's greatest saints in glory!

Readings for today: 1 Kings 20-22, Psalms 100

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April 9, 2024
Signs of Self-Centeredness

Readings for today: [1 Kings 20-22, Psalms 100](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

What happens when you don't get your way? What do you feel when your plan comes up short? How do you respond when things don't quite go the way you want them to? When we are children, our parents did their best to teach us about the dangers of selfishness. When we would get angry or resentful or throw a fit, they would correct us. Teach us to share. Teach us to think about others. Teach us to consider the needs of those around us. For some reason, so many seem to forget these lessons when they become adults.

Ahab was a selfish man. Despite the incredible miracles God worked on his behalf, he became resentful and angry the moment things don't go his way. The Syrian army comes against him and it looks like he is doomed. The numbers are not on his side. He doesn't have the resources to succeed. But God intervenes and delivers the Syrians into his hands not once but twice! But rather than fully obey God by killing the Syrian king, Ahab makes a treaty with him and lets him go. When God confronts him, he doesn't repent but instead goes home and pouts. It's frankly embarrassing. The next chapter gets even worse. He looks out his palace window and sees a vineyard he likes. Despite the fact that he knows the ancestral laws of the nation of Israel regarding the inheritance God gave each tribe and each family, he tries to buy the vineyard from the owner. When Naboth refuses in an effort to remain faithful, Ahab once again grows resentful and angry. He actually goes into his room and pulls the covers over his head, refusing to eat. Again, his behavior is shameful and unworthy of the king. It also opens the door for his wife - a pagan woman named Jezebel - who shows no qualms in making sure Ahab gets what he wants. This, of course, leads to God's judgment on Ahab and his family.

The opposite of the "God-centered" life is a "Self-centered" life. And the signs we have lapsed into a self-centered life are pretty clear. Anger. Resentment. Bitterness. Constant frustration. Anxiety. Fear. Worry. You name it. These feelings make it clear we are struggling to let go and walk with open hands before the Lord. The signs we are pursuing a God-centered life are equally clear. Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Grace. Forgiveness. Flexibility. Humility. When these things become evident in our lives, we can be sure we are living for God and not for Self. So where do you find yourself today?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 1-3, Psalms 101

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April 10, 2024
The Spirit of Elijah

Readings for today: [2 Kings 1-3](#), [Psalms 101](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

A double portion of Elijah's spirit. I have often wondered what that might look like. Then I started coming over here to Ethiopia. I started meeting men and women who had little to no education, very few resources at their disposal, and seemingly no opportunities to change their station in life. I met men and women who have "nothing" by the world's standards and yet they have "everything" by God's standards. Why? They have the spirit of Elijah. They have double and triple portions of his spirit. They perform miracle after miracle on a daily basis. People are healed. Fields become fertile. Water flows in dry and thirsty places. Even the dead are raised. It's powerful and yet they would tell you the miracles are beside the point. All the signs and wonders are not the main event. The main event is Jesus.

In our reading today, both Elijah and Elisha perform miracle after miracle. Future telling. Pools of water suddenly appearing in the desert. Water purification. Incredible military victories. To the skeptical, stories like these make the Bible seem primitive and superstitious. To the doubter, stories like these can be confusing and frustrating as they wrestle with why they don't seem to happen much anymore. To the faithful, stories like these encourage belief and deeper trust in God. However, the question still remains...why does God perform miracles? Why does God break through the time/space continuum? Why does He suspend the laws of nature and the universe? Why does He intervene in certain situations but not others? Reach down and touch certain lives and not others? These are important questions that must be faced and thankfully, the Bible provides a clear answer.

First and foremost, miracles are given for the purpose of pointing God's people to faith. They are not ends in and of themselves. They are signposts. Pointing beyond themselves. They are given to direct our attention heavenward to the Lord of all creation. The Author of all life. They are stark reminders that we are not at the mercy of our circumstances. This world and all the natural laws that govern it - from gravity to thermodynamics to photosynthesis - is not all there is. There is a God who stands above and beyond such laws, who is able to set them aside for reasons only He Himself knows and understands.

Secondly, miracles are given so that God's people might always cling to hope. Even when circumstances seem their most dire. When evil seems to be on the march. Injustice and oppression winning the day. Persecution at its fiercest. Rage and violence burning white hot. Disease ravaging the body. Famine and poverty threatening our well-being. Even in the darkest of times, we still have hope. Hope in a God who can and does intervene. Hope in a God who draws near the broken-hearted and crushed in spirit. Hope in a God who fights on behalf of the poor and oppressed and outcast and stranger.

Third, miracles are given to remind us how limited and finite we are as creatures. Power. Wealth. Influence. Control. We like to live with the illusion that we are the masters of our own destinies especially in the West. We like to believe we are the captains of our fate. We like to think we are in charge. We like to act like we've got everything under control. But miracles remind us who truly holds the power. Miracles remind us of our relative insignificance in the grand scheme of things. Miracles bring us face to face with the power of God and, like Job, we shut our mouths and fall on our faces before Him.

Ultimately, miracles force us to look beyond ourselves. Beyond our needs. Beyond our circumstances. Beyond our wisdom. Beyond our strength. Miracles force us to trust in God. To trust in His purposes and His design. We cannot bend God to our will. There is no magic formula to get God to do our bidding. Miracles happen on His time and in accordance with His will. Our job is to believe. To have faith. To place our lives in His hands and trust Him for the outcome.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 4-7, Psalms 102

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April 11, 2024
Loving our Enemies

Readings for today: [2 Kings 4-7, Psalms 102](#) ([audio reading](#))

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

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

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

It's a beautiful picture and one I get the chance to see face to face today. I am currently training church planters in a region where they recently had a civil war. Tribal conflict in this part of the world has been going on for centuries and yet these brave men and women have set aside their historic enmity and thirst for revenge and instead dedicated themselves to reaching even their enemies with the good news of the gospel. Friends, this is what it means to pray "God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven." When we pray such prayers, we are asking God to bring about His will and His vision for the world in our time.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 8-11, Psalms 103

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April 12, 2024
Biblical Justice

Readings for today: [2 Kings 8-11, Psalms 103](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

Today's reading raises an incredibly important point when it comes to reading the Bible. There is such a thing as Biblical justice but it always gets mediated through a particular cultural context. What I mean by that is that justice is an "objective" reality but how it gets meted out is "subjective." For better or for worse, God has chosen to bring His will to pass through sinful human beings. He always speaks to them in ways they can understand and He works through the cultural norms of the day. In the ancient near east, justice often looked like what Jehu does to Ahab's entire family. The goal in these situations is to eliminate any possibility of a blood relative seeking vengeance on behalf of their family who was killed. This is why Jehu doesn't just kill Ahab but his wife and children and anyone connected to him by marriage such as Ahaziah. He kills all the prophets of Baal and destroys their centers of worship in an effort to wipe out any possibility of future insurrection. Yes, it is done in the name of the Lord. Yes, it is done at the command of the Lord. Yes, it is done to purify and sanctify Israel and it doesn't make much sense to us in the 21st century. Then again, our forms of justice wouldn't make much sense to the people living in ancient times either.

So what do we learn from such events? What's our takeaway when the cultural distance is so great and the chasm that exists between us so broad? Well, first and foremost, we learn God is serious about sin. He is holy and awesome and just and fully within His rights to do what He did to Ahab and his family. The sins of Ahab's family were legion. Idolatry. Murder. Sexual immorality. Greed. Oppression. Extortion. Exploitation. Ahab was the most evil king in Israel's history, a despot who deserved what he got. The same is true for his wife Jezebel and all their family. They sealed their own fates. Second, we learn God is merciful. He doesn't wipe out Israel for her sin. He gives them a chance to repent under the leadership of a new king. A king who cleanses the land of idolatry and Baal-worship, at least partially. A king who, though not perfect, at least restores some semblance of true faith to the region. Finally, we learn God is consistent. Jehu doesn't follow God with his whole heart so God begins to whittle away at Israel's territory. He raises up enemies to come against her as yet another sign of His righteous judgment. The goal in all of this is to get them to turn away from sin and back to Him.

What about you? What about your life? God is still speaking to us through His Word in ways we can understand. God is still at work in our world through the cultural norms of our day. I am currently in northern Ethiopia where the culture is vastly different than our own and yet God is moving powerfully. I spend time with many of my Indian friends who share their experiences of God with me from a cultural context that is very foreign to me. And I see God at work in my own community and country and culture, always bringing about His justice and His righteousness and His salvation. Thanks be to God!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 12-14, Psalms 104

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April 13, 2024
Sins of our fathers

Readings for today: [2 Kings 12-14, Psalms 104](#) ([audio reading](#))

“Those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it.” As someone formally trained in history, I have seen this pattern quite a bit. It’s amazing how much history tends to repeat itself. I’ve also seen this as a pastor in the lives of those I serve. People who struggle to acknowledge the issues from their families of origin often find those same issues impacting them as well. No matter whether we are talking about history on a macro or micro level, there is a great truth to the idea that we tend to repeat the mistakes of our past. We tend to repeat the failures of our past. We tend to repeat the sins of our past.

This was definitely true for the nation of Israel. When God tore the kingdom in two in judgment, He gave Jeroboam the larger part. But Jeroboam struggled to trust God. He was fearful he would lose the people’s allegiance if they returned to Jerusalem on a regular basis and worshipped at God’s Temple. It makes sense from a human perspective. Solomon had built the Temple. It represented a golden age in Israel’s history when the line of David rested securely on the throne of a united kingdom. So Jeroboam set up his own temple system with his own priests and shrines and idols. In so doing, he broke the first three commandments. This was a grievous sin that broke the heart of God and sets in motion a series of events that will eventually lead to the northern kingdom’s destruction. Tragically, the kings who followed Jeroboam - even Jehu - refused to repent of the sins of their past and continued to repeat them. It’s why you see the refrain, “but they did not turn away from the sins that the house of Jeroboam had caused Israel to commit” over and over again. It represents the heart of God’s indictment on His people.

Take some time and reflect on your own life. Where are you repeating the sins of your past? What issues from your family of origin do you struggle to acknowledge, much less face? How are you intentionally repenting over the generational sin in your family? Unless these things are honestly and authentically laid before the Lord in true confession, they will continue to trip you up. Now broaden it out a bit. What about the historic sins of your community or nation? There’s not a single nation on the earth that doesn’t have skeletons in their closet. Issues from their past that need to be brought into the light of day so they can be dealt with. The longer we wait to fully address the “sins of our fathers”, the more we’ll struggle and suffer in this world. I think of a friend of mine who leads the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Rwanda. He is actively trying to address the sin of ethnic hatred that resulted in the horrific genocide in 1994. Once a full and truthful confession is made, forgiveness and reconciliation can be accomplished and the nation healed. It’s a process but it is bearing great fruit. Imagine what could happen if we engaged in a similar process in our country?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 15-17, Psalms 105 (No devotionals on Sundays)

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April 14, 2024
(no commentaries on Sundays)

Readings for today: [2 Kings 15-17, Psalms 105](#) (audio reading)

April 15, 2024
Trust

Readings for today: [2 Kings 18-19, Psalms 106](#) (audio reading)

Trust is the most important currency when it comes to leadership. If one trusts a leader, one will be willing to do just about anything for them. If one doesn't trust a leader, they will do as little as possible. It's been said that organizations move at the speed of trust. Families depend on trust. Friendships are built on trust. Trust is everything.

One of the most striking parts of the story we read today is the trust God's people have in King Hezekiah. The Assyrians were one of the most fearsome and brutal empires of the ancient world. Sennacherib was one of their greatest kings. Assyria had already wiped out the northern kingdom of Israel. They had taken the people into exile, scattering them in different places so they would never rise up in rebellion. This was Assyria's standard operating procedure. Now it was the southern kingdom's turn to feel their wrath and come under their control. They brought a massive army to the gates of Jerusalem and laid siege to the city. There was no hope of fighting back. No chance of escape. The sight must have been completely demoralizing. To add insult to injury, Sennacherib sends his envoy to the city to call for their surrender. He cites the litany of victories his king has won. He talks about all the so-called gods who have fallen before them. He even claims divine sanction for his mission of violence. The whole point of this exercise is to shake the faith of the people in Hezekiah. But the people refuse to respond. Their trust in Hezekiah is absolute and well-founded. Hezekiah turns to God for help and the Assyrians are destroyed.

It's an incredible testimony to the power of trust. Trust in God. Trust in godly leadership. Trust in one another. And such trust doesn't rise in a vacuum. It was built on years of faithful leadership from their king. Hezekiah turned the hearts of his people back to God. He tore down the high places. He destroyed all the idols. He prospered in all sorts of ways because he trusted God. And because Hezekiah trusted God, his people trusted him. They believed in him. They followed him. Even in the face of insurmountable odds, they never lost their faith in Hezekiah's leadership.

Now consider your own life. All of us lead in all sorts of ways in all kinds of situation. We lead in our families. We lead in our places of work. We lead in our churches. We are all given influence on some level. We are all given a certain amount of authority. What do we with it? Do we seek to build trust among those we lead by serving them? By doing all we can to make them successful and set them free? Or do we cling to our power and influence in order to control others? When we are able to trust one another, God can do great things in and through us. When trust is lost, life becomes a struggle. Where do you find yourself today?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 20-22, Psalms 107

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April 16, 2024
What Drives You?

Readings for today: 2 Kings 20-22, Psalms 107 (audio reading)

I've often wondered what drives the kings of Israel and Judah. What drives some like Hezekiah and Josiah to be faithful to the Lord and what drives others like Manasseh and Amon to be unfaithful? What drives some to tear down the high places and what drives some to rebuild them? What drives some to love and serve Yahweh with all their heart and what drives others to chase after other gods? Frankly, we probably will never know but at the same time, human beings are human beings. We are creatures driven by desire who react in all sorts of ways to the feelings our circumstances engender.

In our reading today, it's clear the kingdom of Judah is surrounded by enemies. The nations surrounding them are ascending while they are descending. They are slowly but surely encroaching on their borders. Picking off one town after the next. Even invading as we saw with the Assyrians. This creates all kinds of political and social pressure to which the kings must respond. I imagine that's at least one factor in why some kings responded with faith and others with fear. There was no such thing as separation of church in state in the ancient near east. Kings and emperors, tribes and nations, all believed their gods were intimately involved in their daily lives. When the nation experienced blessing, it must mean their god was pleased and exercising his power on their behalf. When the nation was struggling, it must mean their god was angry and withholding his power from them. Not only that but when nations came into conflict, the battle wasn't just waged on earth. The gods clashed in the heavens as well. This is why Sennacherib boasted about defeating the gods and not just the nations. Israel, however, was different or at least they were supposed to be. They knew Yahweh was Lord of heaven and earth and had no rival among the gods. The nations around them worshipped empty idols so when those same pagan nations defeated them, it wasn't because Yahweh was weak or defeated, it was because they had sinned. Typically their sin involved treating Yahweh as if he were just another pagan god. This is what "doing evil in the sight of the Lord" was all about.

You and I are often tempted to treat God the same way. Every time we try to bargain with Him or make some kind of deal with Him. Every time we try to be "good enough" to earn His blessing and favor. Every time we treat Him like a first responder, only to be called upon in case of emergency. We are treating Him like a pagan god. God wants to be involved in every moment of every day. God wants to be part of your day to day life. God wants a relationship with you. He wants you to trust Him. Believe in Him. Submit to Him because He knows what's best for you. So what drives you? Is it faith or fear? Is it belief or doubt? Is it trust or anxiety? And how do you respond to the ever-changing circumstances of your life? Do you respond like Hezekiah and Josiah or do you respond like Manasseh and Amon? Place your trust in the Lord. The Maker of heaven and earth. The One who holds all authority in heaven and on earth in His hands.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 23-25, Psalms 108

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April 17, 2024
Past the Point of No Return

Readings for today: [2 Kings 23-25, Psalms 108](#) ([audio reading](#))

Eventually we run out of chances. Eventually we do reach the point of no return. Eventually the bill for our sin does come due. I think of the addicts I've known and counseled over the years who relapse and relapse and relapse. Eventually their families do run out of patience. Eventually their broken promises to change ring hollow. Eventually they have to face the consequences of their decisions. I remember one young man who was in his thirties. His family had supported him for years despite constant deceit and manipulation. His mother reached her breaking point which is when she came into my office for help. I suggested finally and completely cutting him off financially. It was the toughest decision she had ever had to make but it was the right one. I think of the many people I know who pursue all kinds of unhealthy habits. They refuse to exercise. They don't eat well. They don't get enough sleep. Eventually, their bodies break down. Their mental health suffers. And sometimes the damage is permanent. These are just a few examples I could cite that illustrate what happens when we refuse to walk in the way of the Lord.

Now expand this idea to a macro level. Consider the nation of Judah. For decades they have been led by evil kings who lead them into all kinds of idolatry and sin. It piles up year after year. And though God sends them prophets and preachers to call them back to faithfulness, they ignore His Word and, in some cases, kill the very messengers God has sent. Eventually they run out of chances. Eventually things reach the point of no return. Eventually the bill for their collective, national sin comes due. Even the radical reforms of Josiah are not enough to stem the tide of God's righteous judgment. The people of God will now have to experience the consequences of their decisions over the years. Warfare. Destruction. Exile. It's heartbreaking and painful to read.

Now think about your own life. Think about our life together as a nation. Think about the communities you live in or the family systems you are part of. Think about the sins - both individually and collectively - that we are currently engaged in. Do we think we are immune to the consequences? Do we think we will somehow escape God's judgment? Do we think we can continue living a life of rebellion before the Lord without reaching a point of no return? Friends, God will not be mocked. He loves us too much to let us persist in sin. The Scriptures say He disciplines those He loves in an effort to bring them to repentance. Make the time today to take stock and take whatever steps are necessary to turn from your sin and embrace Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 1-4, Psalms 109

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April 18, 2024
The Will of God

Readings for today: [Isaiah 1-4, Psalms 109](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

What is the will of God for my life? It's a question I field all the time. I hear it from young and old alike. New believers and mature believers have it in common. We all want to know what God wants from us. Typically, when we ask the question, we want to know something specific. What is God's will for my family? What is God's will for my future vocation? What is God's will as I hit my golden years? What is God's will with the years I have left? Who should I marry? How many kids should I have? These are the kinds of questions we often associate with "God's will." But what if God's will were bigger and grander than we have ever imagined? What if God's will had less to do with the actual events of our lives and more to do with the kind of people we become? (Let me hasten to add, I believe His will involves both.) That's what Isaiah the prophet was wrestling with in the first chapter of his book.

"Wash yourselves. Cleanse yourselves. Remove your evil deeds from my sight. Stop doing evil. Learn to do what is good. Pursue justice. Correct the oppressor. Defend the rights of the fatherless. Plead the widow's cause...Zion will be redeemed by justice, those who repent, by righteousness." (Isaiah 1:16-17, 27 CSB)

The people of God were engaged in all the "right" activities. They were bringing all the "right" sacrifices and worshipping at all the "right" seasons. But they were just going through the motions. Their hearts were not in it. They were too busy chasing their own desires and following their own dreams. The reign of King Uzziah was one of great wealth and power and prestige. It was a golden age of sorts. And yet the seeds of Judah's destruction were already being sown. The people had abandoned their God. They tolerated injustice. Their leaders were corrupt. As a result, God brought judgment upon them. Warfare. Violence. Suffering. Pain. God exposed them to the consequences of their sin with the hope they would return to Him. "Why do you want more beatings? Why do you keep on rebelling? The whole head is hurt, and the whole heart is sick. From the sole of the foot even to the head, no spot is uninjured — wounds, welts, and festering sores not cleansed, bandaged, or soothed with oil." (Isaiah 1:5-6 CSB)

And what would a return to God look like? It would look like repentance. Confession of sin. Turning from wickedness. Learning to do what was good. Pursuing justice and righteousness. Defending the defenseless. Rising up against the oppressor. In short, it was about seeking God first in their lives and aligning their hearts with His will. Nothing has changed over the centuries. God's will remains the same yesterday, today, and forever. He has clearly revealed in His Word what He wants for our lives. He wants us to live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with Him. He wants us to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. He wants us to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves. As we do these things, He promises to bring blessing to us and through us to the world.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 5-8, Psalms 110

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April 19, 2024
A Prophet's Call

Readings for today: [Isaiah 5-8, Psalms 110](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

There are many today that claim the title “Prophet.” They claim to hear messages from the Lord. They claim to have special revelations from God. They speak in all kinds of riddles. They string together all sorts of meaningless phrases. They pluck verses out of context from the Bible to predict the future. I see them all over YouTube. I see them all over social media. Many that I know and love have been taken in by them. They are grifters. They are con men and women. They use the Bible to exploit the vulnerable and weak and helpless. I believe God will judge them harshly when He comes again. How do I know? Because their supposed “prophecies” never come true. They always fail. And the Biblical test of any prophet is whether or not what they have to say actually comes to pass. If it doesn’t and they prove false, the command is clear. Execute them. Stone them to death for claiming to speak for God.

Biblically speaking, prophecy has more to do with “truth-telling” than “future-telling” though I readily admit it can be both. Prophets in the Old Testament were called to speak truth to power and confront the leaders of God’s people in an effort to turn them away from sin and back to God. It was a challenging call. It often put their lives at risk. They sacrificed much for the call. They were more often than not, discouraged and depressed by the lack of response to their message. Listen to how Isaiah describes his own call, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord asking: Who will I send? Who will go for us? I said: Here I am. Send me. And he replied: Go! Say to these people: Keep listening, but do not understand; keep looking, but do not perceive. Make the minds of these people dull; deafen their ears and blind their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears, understand with their minds, turn back, and be healed. Then I said, “Until when, Lord?” And he replied: Until cities lie in ruins without inhabitants, houses are without people, the land is ruined and desolate, and the Lord drives the people far away, leaving great emptiness in the land. Though a tenth will remain in the land, it will be burned again. Like the terebinth or the oak that leaves a stump when felled, the holy seed is the stump.” (Isaiah 6:8-13 CSB)

Woof. Thanks but no thanks. Speak to a people who will not listen? Go to a people who are blind? Preach to those whose hearts are actively being hardened by God against your message? Until their cities lie in ruins and the people are in exile and death and destruction reign in the land? That’s the call? Are you serious, God? And yet, Isaiah obeys. He does exactly what God calls him to do. And God uses him to preach powerful messages of repentance to His people.

I don’t know about you but I believe we are living in a time similar to that of the ancient prophets. The church in North America, once so vibrant and full of life, has fallen on hard times. She seems more concerned with herself than with the mission God has entrusted to her. She seems more consumed with her own comfort than in sacrificing for the Lord. She seems more focused on building up herself rather than building up the Kingdom. What we need now are prophets who will speak God’s truth no matter the cost. Prophets who will challenge God’s people to push beyond personal preferences, move outside their comfort zones, and offer all they have in service to God. God won’t accept anything less. Nor should we. When I read Isaiah, I find myself deeply convicted. I find myself falling on my knees before the Lord and asking Him to show me how I can give more, serve more, offer more of myself back to Him. I know whatever I ask of God’s people must begin in my own heart. So this is my prayer.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 9-12, Psalms 111

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April 20, 2024
God's Vision for the World

Readings for today: [Isaiah 9-12, Psalms 111](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

I am wrapping up my time in Ethiopia. It has been so good to be back with the people I love. The men and women I get to serve while I am over here are some of the most inspiring you could ever meet. You won't see their names in the news. They don't have large followings on social media. They will never be recognized by the world. But they will be great in the Kingdom of God. They will sit at the right hand of Jesus when He comes again. I am humbled just to know them.

One of the real challenges in this country is tribal violence. Ethnic conflict. Extremist groups from different regions engaging in guerilla warfare against the federal government. The reaction has been swift and harsh. Suspension of civil liberties. States of emergency. Homes invaded. People imprisoned. Loss of any kind of due process. It's heartbreaking to witness. I have dear friends over here who have experienced these things simply because of their ethnic identity. They happen to belong to wrong tribe and live in the wrong place at the wrong time. This kind of thing is not unique to Ethiopia, of course. We see it all over the world. We see it in the Middle East. We see it in Russia and Ukraine. We see it in America. No matter where one goes, human beings seemingly have this innate, sinful tendency to divide. And sadly, our divisions are rarely peaceful.

Thankfully, God has a different vision for the world. One He casts in the eleventh chapter of the Book of Isaiah. "The wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the goat. The calf, the young lion, and the fattened calf will be together, and a child will lead them. The cow and the bear will graze, their young ones will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like cattle. An infant will play beside the cobra's pit, and a toddler will put his hand into a snake's den. They will not harm or destroy each other on my entire holy mountain, for the land will be as full of the knowledge of the Lord as the sea is filled with water." (Isaiah 11:6-9 CSB) When the Messiah comes in all His power and glory, the world will finally know reconciliation. The world will finally know peace. True shalom. The end of all division and violence and hatred and enmity.

How do we know this to be true? Because of what God did on the cross. There He tore down every dividing wall of hostility that exists between us and He gave us His Spirit to bring unity. The church is therefore called to live in such a way that we give the world a picture of what life will one day look like in the Kingdom of God. Imagine the power of the witness we could have if God's people would embrace Isaiah's vision? Imagine a church unified across political, ethnic, tribal, economic, generational, and theological divisions? Imagine a church that took seriously the commands from Psalm 133 and John 17? It's actually not all that hard to imagine if we take seriously the call to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus and seek to follow the example He lays down in Philippians 2:5-11.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 13-17, Psalms 112 (No devotionals on Sundays)

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April 21, 2024
(no commentaries on Sundays)

Readings for today: [Isaiah 13-17, Psalms 112](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

April 22, 2024
The Gospel of the Old Testament

Readings for today: [Isaiah 18-22, Psalms 113](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

Egypt. The land of slavery. The land of oppression. The land of attempted genocide. For hundreds of years, the people of Israel labored there under the whip. Beaten. Abused. Dying young. Their children born to a life of hard labor. Powerless. Helpless. Hopeless. It was a life of constant pain. Constant torment. Constant suffering. Even after they were delivered by God, Egypt continued to be a thorn in their side. Invading. Killing. A perpetual threat on their southern border. It's tough to overstate the hatred and enmity between these two nations. And yet, God loves the Egyptians.

Assyria. One of the most powerful and brutal empires in the ancient world. They fielded the world's first professional army. Developed advanced technology like iron weapons and war chariots. They weaponized terror as a military tactic. And they were absolutely ruthless when it came to putting down resistance. They would sack cities. Displace entire people groups. Employed horrific public torture as a means of psychological warfare. Israel hated them. Israel feared them. It's why Jonah ran to Joppa rather than go to Nineveh. He simply couldn't stomach the sight of his enemies. And yet, God loves the Assyrians.

The Book of Isaiah is often called, "The Gospel of the Old Testament" and today's passage is a good reason why... "On that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the center of the land of Egypt and a pillar to the Lord near her border. It will be a sign and witness to the Lord of Armies in the land of Egypt. When they cry out to the Lord because of their oppressors, he will send them a savior and leader, and he will rescue them. The Lord will make himself known to Egypt, and Egypt will know the Lord on that day. They will offer sacrifices and offerings; they will make vows to the Lord and fulfill them. The Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing. Then they will turn to the Lord, and he will be receptive to their prayers and heal them. On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. Assyria will go to Egypt, Egypt to Assyria, and Egypt will worship with Assyria. On that day Israel will form a triple alliance with Egypt and Assyria — a blessing within the land. The Lord of Armies will bless them, saying, "Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance are blessed." (Isaiah 19:19-25 CSB)

This is an incredible passage pointing to an even more incredible reality. The unconditional nature of God's grace. It comes to us all. Jew and Gentile alike. Egyptian, Assyrian, and Israelite alike. Republican and Democrat alike. Progressive and conservative alike. Black, white, and brown alike. It is no one's possession. No one has a right to claim it for their own. No one is more privileged than another in the eyes of God. All have sinned and fallen short of His glory and all stand in need of His grace. This is why Jesus gives us this command... "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons and daughters of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:43-48 CSB)

Jesus knows there are no “enemies” in His Kingdom. No “enemies” beyond His reach. No “enemies” beyond His salvation. Jesus knows there is not a single person or single power on this earth who can stand before His love. Jesus holds the power to turn mortal enemies into family. Jesus holds the power to overcome hate and anger and the desire for vengeance with mercy and forgiveness. Jesus holds the power to transform even the hardest hearts. The question is...do we believe Him? Do we trust Him? And do our lives and our conduct and our speech and our interactions reflect this deep and glorious truth?

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 23-27, Psalms 114

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April 23, 2024
The Honor of God

Readings for today: [Isaiah 23-27, Psalms 114](#) ([video intro](#)) ([audio reading](#))

One of the great privileges of my life is to spend about a month in Africa each year. I've been almost twenty times at this point and I've learned an incredible amount from the cross-cultural interactions I have with my brothers and sisters across the globe. They have helped me understand the Bible better. They have helped me understand God better. They have taught me much when it comes to faith. Perhaps the biggest lesson has to do with the dynamic of honor and shame that shows up throughout the Scriptures. The world tends to equate humility with shame and pride with honor but the Bible inverts this matrix. According to Scripture, pride ultimately produces shame and humility is the path to genuine honor. This dynamic holds true not just for individuals but for tribes, cities, and even nations.

What was the great sin of Tyre and Sidon? Two of the great commercial trading centers in the ancient near east? Pride. Tyre saw itself as "the bestower of crowns, whose traders are princes, whose merchants are the honored ones of the earth?" (Isaiah 23:8 CSB) Sidon enjoyed tremendous wealth and privilege. "And on many waters your revenue was the grain of Shihor, the harvest of the Nile; you were the merchant of the nations." (Isaiah 23:3 CSB) In their pursuit of worldly honor and riches and power, they forgot the Lord. They dishonored God. And they paid the price. "Wail, O ships of Tarshish, for your haven has been destroyed... Be ashamed, O Sidon, for the sea has spoken..." (Isaiah 23:1, 4 CSB)

But it's not just Tyre and Sidon who make this mistake. The whole earth has forgotten God. The whole earth pursues wealth and power and honor and glory apart from God. The whole earth seeks to exalt itself rather than humble themselves before their creator. Therefore, the Lord will bring His righteous judgment. No one shall escape. "Look, the Lord is stripping the earth bare and making it desolate. He will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants: people and priest alike, servant and master, female servant and mistress, buyer and seller, lender and borrower, creditor and debtor. The earth will be stripped completely bare and will be totally plundered, for the Lord has spoken this message." (Isaiah 24:1-3 CSB) And why does the Lord speak such a harsh word? Why does the Lord render such a harsh judgment? Because the Lord is jealous for the glory of His Name. He is jealous for His own honor. He will not rest until the whole earth sings His praises. "They raise their voices, they sing out; they proclaim in the west the majesty of the Lord. Therefore, in the east honor the Lord! In the coasts and islands of the west honor the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. From the ends of the earth we hear songs: The Splendor of the Righteous One." (Isaiah 24:14-16a CSB)

Human beings were made for one glorious purpose...to bring honor to their Creator. To enjoy God and to worship Him alone forever. To praise God for all eternity. This is the great work we were designed for. This is the great work we were made for. And it is to our abiding shame that we neglect this great task and forget our God. It is to our great shame that we "exchange the truth of God for a lie and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen." (Romans 1:25 CSB) We pursue worldly honor and worldly wealth and worldly power to our own destruction. Because we have turned away from God and gone our own way, He has "given us up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. We become filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. We are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless." (Romans 1:28-31 CSB) And God simply will not allow such evil to stand. So He brings judgment. He lays low the proud. He shames the arrogant. He dishonors the honored among all the

earth. “The Lord of Armies planned it, to desecrate all its glorious beauty, to disgrace all the honored ones of the earth.” (Isaiah 23:9 CSB)

This is why we must consider carefully the priorities of our lives. Why do we do the things we do? What drives us? What gives us purpose and fulfillment? Are we truly seeking to honor God in all we say and do? Or are we trying to steal a bit of that honor for ourselves? Are we truly seeking to glorify God in our homes, neighborhoods, schools, and places of work? Or these just means we are using to justify our own ends?

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 28-30, Psalms 115

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April 24, 2024
Covenant of Life

Readings for today: [Isaiah 28-30, Psalms 115](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

The heart of the reading for me today is Isaiah 28:15-18. There God confronts His people with a powerful Word. ““For you said, “We have made a covenant with Death, and we have an agreement with Sheol; when the overwhelming catastrophe passes through, it will not touch us, because we have made falsehood our refuge and have hidden behind treachery.” (Isaiah 28:15 CSB) I think about our own culture. The covenant we too have made with death. Abortion on demand. Suicide. Euthanasia. I think about the lies we believe. Our seeming inability to sift through what’s true and false. Our tendency to naively accept whatever fits our ideological worldview rather than pursue honesty and transparency. I grieve our propensity towards violence. School shootings. Racially-motivated hate crimes. Sexual abuse. I grieve our morbid fascination with self-destruction. Legalization of marijuana and other harmful substances. Addiction to opioids and other pain-killers. All in an attempt to numb our pain. I grieve the fact that we continue to seek refuge in the lies we tell ourselves and in the falsehoods we cling to at all costs. If I were not a Christian, I would despair.

But then I read these words, “Look, I have laid a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation; the one who believes will be unshakable. And I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the mason’s level.” Hail will sweep away the false refuge, and water will flood your hiding place. Your covenant with Death will be dissolved, and your agreement with Sheol will not last.” (Isaiah 28:16-18 CSB) Once again, I am overwhelmed. God does what I cannot do. God does what we cannot do. God does what no government or business or church or non-profit agency - no matter how pure and righteous their motives - can do! He annuls the covenant we made with death! He sets aside our agreement with Sheol! He lays a foundation in Zion. A sure foundation built on tested and precious stone on which we can build our lives! He doesn’t ask us to rescue ourselves. He doesn’t ask us to clean up our act. He doesn’t expect us to find a way out of the mess we’ve made. He simply steps in. He restores justice. He restores righteousness. He sweeps away all the lies and falsehoods. He destroys death. He robs the grave. And He grants His people new life...abundant life...in Him!

Will we still sin? Yes. Are we still a rebellious people? Absolutely. Will we still run from God? Crawl off the altar? Try to build our lives on shifting sand? All that and more. But thankfully God is patient with us. “Therefore the Lord is waiting to show you mercy, and is rising up to show you compassion, for the Lord is a just God. All who wait patiently for him are happy.” (Isaiah 30:18 CSB) And because God is faithful, we can be sure a day is coming when we will weep no more. We will see Him face to face. We will know His ways and walk in them. We will tear down every idol in our lives. Our brokenness will be bound and our wounds healed. We will sing a new song in the night. We will keep the holy feast. We will witness the victory of the Lord our God.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 31-35, Psalms 116

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April 25, 2024
The Results of Righteousness

Readings for today: [Isaiah 31-35, Psalms 116](#) ([video intro](#)) ([audio reading](#))

One of the misconceptions I run into a lot is how too many people equate “righteousness” with “restrictions.” They see God’s plan as the quickest way to suck all the fun out of life. They perceive God to be a cosmic kill-joy. They believe the old canard that God sits on His throne and spends His days devising all kinds of ways to squash everyone’s joy. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Listen to how the prophet Isaiah describes the impact of righteousness on a nation. Isaiah 32:1-2 CSB, “Behold, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule in justice. Each will be like a hiding place from the wind, a shelter from the storm, like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land.” That sounds pretty good, right? Especially if you are living in the desert regions of the Middle East? Keep reading. Isaiah 32:17–18 CSB, “And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.” Again, doesn’t that sound wonderful? Isn’t that what we all hope for in our lives? Peace? Quietness? Trust forever? Don’t you want to dwell in a peaceful habitation? Safe and secure? I was just in northern Ethiopia where they are recovering from a civil war and I can tell you things like safety and security and peace are at the top of their list. Let me give you one more. Isaiah 33:5-6 CSB, “The Lord is exalted, for He dwells on high; He has filled Zion with justice and righteousness. There will be times of security for you - a storehouse of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge. The fear of the Lord is Zion’s treasure.” What a beautiful picture of what God has in store for those who will fear Him, those who will follow Him, those who will worship Him. He is the source of all righteousness and justice in the world. And if one wants to experience the blessings of righteousness, one must seek to dwell in God’s presence for they are a byproduct of a life-giving relationship with Him.

So, have you changed your mind about righteousness? Do you find yourself longing for the more righteous life? Do you want the blessings of righteousness in your own life or community or nation? Don’t fall for the enemy’s lies. Don’t believe his falsehoods. Don’t let him deceive you. Your Heavenly Father knows what’s best for you. Your Heavenly Father loves you. Your Heavenly Father has good gifts He wants to give you. Trust Him. Believe Him. Submit to Him. Follow Him. Let justice flow into your life and righteousness be an ever-running stream in your soul.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 36-38, Psalms 117

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April 26, 2024
Motivation

Readings for today: [Isaiah 36-38, Psalms 117](#) ([video intro](#)) ([audio reading](#))

The southern kingdom of Judah didn't stand a chance. Assyria was the greatest empire of her day. Sennacherib, her greatest emperor. Her armies blitzed through the Middle East conquering nation after nation. No one could stand against them. They had the only standing professional army of the time outfitted with the best tech human civilization had developed. They were literally undefeated everywhere they went. And now they stand outside the gates of Jerusalem. 185,000 strong. Hezekiah has no army to put in the field. Not even two thousand soldiers to ride a horse. They are helpless. Hopeless. All is lost. Except for God. When things are at their darkest, Hezekiah cries out to God for help. He cries to God for salvation. He cries out to God on behalf of his nation. And God answers him. Delivers him. Saves him. It's a powerful story and one of the great miracles in human history.

Sadly, what's often missed is Hezekiah's motivation. "Now, Lord our God, save us from his power so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, Lord, are God — you alone." (Isaiah 37:20 CSB) Note that he doesn't cry for God to make Judah great again. He doesn't call on God to be faithful to the people He loves. He doesn't give God a list of reasons as to why Judah deserves to be saved. He doesn't talk about their righteous worship or righteous deeds or point to their illustrious history. No, at the heart of Hezekiah's prayer is a desire for God to get all the glory. A passion to see God's name lifted high. Hezekiah prays for this miracle - not so much so that Judah will be saved - but so all the world will know Judah's God stands above all other gods. It's an evangelistic prayer. Hezekiah wants all the nations of the earth to know the Lord and this is what drives him to his knees on behalf of his people.

We too are living through a time of great social unrest. Our country is more divided than ever. More at odds than ever. Our national leaders are at each other's throats. Different groups have taken to the streets to protest for sweeping cultural change. They take over college campuses, creating atmospheres of hate. Some of those groups are violent. They burn. They tear down. They destroy. There are political forces in play vying for influence, power, and control. Each with a different vision for the future of our country. Each claiming God is on their side. Many believers I know are praying for our country. They long to see God work a similar miracle in our day like He did for Hezekiah. But are we praying with the same godly motivation?

I pray for our nation every single day. I pray for humility. For repentance. For transformed hearts. I pray for our leaders. I pray they will forsake their wicked, sinful ways. I pray they will lay aside their ambitions and greed and lust for power and instead have a heart to serve the Lord. I pray for an honest reckoning of the sins of our past. I pray for a renewed passion for justice and compassion. I pray grace to replace anger. Mercy to replace vengeance. Love to replace hate. I pray God will do all these things for His glory not our own. I pray He will do these things for the sake of His great name not our own. I pray God will do these things to declare His greatness not our own. In short, I am trying to pray with the same motivation as Hezekiah for it is our only hope as a nation.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 39-41, Psalms 118

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April 27, 2024
Ask the Right Question

Readings for today: [Isaiah 39-41, Psalms 118](#) ([audio reading](#))

Over the last two weeks, I had the privilege of spending time with some of the great men and women of the faith. Men and women who put their lives on the line every single day to preach the gospel. Men and women who risk it all as they seek to expand the Kingdom of God on earth. They give up homes. They give up families. They give up livelihoods. They leave their communities and go to far away places. They cross tribal and language barriers. They lay it all on the line for Jesus. I long ago stopped asking why. The answer is obvious. Jesus is more than enough for them. Lately, I've been asking how. How can they do these things? Where do they find the strength? Where do they find the courage? Where do they find the hope to endure the persecution and hardship and suffering? Today's passage from Isaiah gives us the answer.

It begins with the call of God to every single man and woman of faith. Not just pastors. Not just church leaders. Not just gifted evangelists. Every single man or woman who calls on the name of Jesus and places their faith in Him is called by God to share the gospel with those around them. And as we do, the power of God Himself works through us to lift up every valley, tear down every mountain, and make straight every path so those who do not yet know God may come to faith in Him. "A voice of one crying out: Prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness; make a straight highway for our God in the desert. Every valley will be lifted up, and every mountain and hill will be leveled; the uneven ground will become smooth and the rough places, a plain. And the glory of the Lord will appear, and all humanity together will see it, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." (Isaiah 40:3-5 CSB)

This call comes with a promise. We are not alone in this work. God goes with us and before us and will accomplish it through us. Listen to all the promises He makes in Isaiah 41. "Who has stirred up someone from the east? In righteousness he calls him to serve. The Lord hands nations over to him, and he subdues kings. He makes them like dust with his sword, like wind-driven stubble with his bow....Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will hold on to you with my righteous right hand....You will look for those who contend with you, but you will not find them. Those who war against you will become absolutely nothing....See, I will make you into a sharp threshing board, new, with many teeth. You will thresh mountains and pulverize them and make hills into chaff. You will winnow them and a wind will carry them away, a whirlwind will scatter them. But you will rejoice in the Lord; you will boast in the Holy One of Israel...I will open rivers on the barren heights, and springs in the middle of the plains. I will turn the desert into a pool and dry land into springs. I will plant cedar, acacia, myrtle, and olive trees in the wilderness. I will put juniper, elm, and cypress trees together in the desert, so that all may see and know, consider and understand, that the hand of the Lord has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it." (Isaiah 41:2, 10, 12, 15-16, 18-20 CSB) Over and over again, God promises to protect. Promises to provide. Promises to guide. Promises to work miracles through His people all for His glory. God is making His name known throughout the earth. God will not rest until every corner of the globe has heard the name of Jesus. God is working even now to make sure every knee bows and every tongue confesses to the glory of God the Father. This is His great plan and He invites us to be part of it!

We get so caught up asking God, "Why?" I want us to shift our question. Instead of asking "why", ask God "how?" How can I do your will? How can I accomplish what you desire for me? How can I proclaim this gospel to my family, friends, neighbors, co-workers? How can I do what you've called me to do right now, in this moment, even today?

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 42-44, Psalms 119:1-32 (No devotionals on Sundays)

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April 28, 2024 (no commentaries on Sunday)

Readings for today: [Isaiah 42-44](#), [Psalms 119:1-32](#) (audio reading)

April 29, 2024
The Sovereignty of God

Readings for today: [Isaiah 45-48](#), [Psalms 119:33-64](#) (audio reading)

I recently was talking to a friend about my desire to plant churches in some of the hardest to reach places on earth. Places that are dangerous. Places that are full of darkness and violence and life-threatening poverty and despair. Places where it's hard to get a visa to travel. Places where the US State Department has issued a "Level Four" travel advisory which essentially means "do not go." Places where safety and security are not guaranteed. My friend works on anti-poverty issues on a global level and he knows these places. He's been to some of these countries. And he knows some of the leaders there personally. He was sharing with me how some of these leaders have begun to have visions and dreams from God. They are being called to open their doors to Judaism and Christianity in order to bring the three great Abrahamic faiths together. They are asking him how it can happen. It's a powerful reminder of God's sovereignty over the nations of the earth.

In today's reading, God declares His sovereignty over Cyrus the Great. Cyrus believes he is conquering the world through his own strength. Cyrus believes his own god is giving him great success as former empires like Babylon fall before him. Cyrus believes his military genius and exceptional leadership ability is winning the day. Isaiah looks at all that will happen and sees a different power at work. Though Cyrus doesn't know God, God knows him. God is using him to bring about His judgment on Babylon. God will use him to bring his people from exile back home. God will give Cyrus what he needs to be successful though he has not earned it and does not worship the true and living God. God will do this for the sake of His beloved Israel. "I will go before you and level the uneven places; I will shatter the bronze doors and cut the iron bars in two. I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches from secret places, so that you may know that I am the Lord. I am the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. I call you by your name, for the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel my chosen one. I give a name to you, though you do not know me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; there is no God but me. I will strengthen you, though you do not know me, so that all may know from the rising of the sun to its setting that there is no one but me. I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make success and create disaster; I am the Lord, who does all these things." (Isaiah 45:2-7 CSB)

It's hard for us to look around the world today and see God's sovereign plan at work. We have this false notion that if God is good then He will relieve all suffering. He will protect us from all pain. He will heal every heartbreak. He will cause every war and act of violence to cease. At the same time, we refuse to bow the knee to Him. We refuse to submit to Him. We do not want Him to control our lives or tell us what to do. We want to be free to make our own decisions and choose the course of our lives. Friends, we cannot have it both ways. The Bible is clear. God is working His sovereign will out on the earth. He will bring His plans to pass. "By myself I have sworn; truth has gone from my mouth, a word that will not be revoked: Every knee will bow to me, every tongue will swear allegiance." (Isaiah 45:23 CSB) But He will do this through His people. He will accomplish this in spite of our sinfulness and rebellion. He will achieve His perfect ends through imperfect vessels like you and me. He will use even those who do not know Him to bring about His will on the earth. "I declare the end from the beginning,

and from long ago what is not yet done, saying: my plan will take place, and I will do all my will.”
(Isaiah 46:10 CSB)

God is not limited by us in any way. God is not subject to our fleeting desires or ever-changing feelings. He is not at the mercy of our weaknesses nor is He threatened by our vulnerabilities. God is God. He rules and reigns above it all. He is more than able to bring to completion the good work He has begun. His plan will come to pass. He will do His will. The question is how soon will we submit to Him?

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 49-51, Psalms 119:65-96

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April 30, 2024
The Compassion of God

Readings for today: [Isaiah 49-51, Psalms 119:65-96](#) (audio reading)

There are some who struggle with a God who feels. A God who expresses deep emotions. A God who suffers with and alongside His people. They are uncomfortable because they want to protect God's unchanging nature. They want to guard against anything that might threaten God's immutability. They want to make sure God isn't driven or influenced by anything or anyone outside of Himself. I get it. I really do. And yet I reject this understanding of God because it simply is not Biblical.

God clearly reveals Himself as a God of compassion. A God who cares deeply for His people like a mother does a child. A God who loves His people dearly and who will never let them go. A God who binds Himself to His people in an unbreakable covenant forever. God freely chose this path. He freely chose to define Himself as the God of Israel. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. From beginning to end, God makes it clear that He will be our God and we will be His people. He walks with us in the Garden of Eden and He dwells with us in the New Jerusalem. Along the way, He provides Tabernacle and Temple as places where heaven and earth meet and now, after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, He provides His Spirit to come and live in our hearts. This is who God is. This is who God has revealed Himself to be. He has shown Himself to be this kind of God and no other.

Listen to how Isaiah describes it in our readings for today. "This is what the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel, his Holy One, says to one who is despised, to one abhorred by people, to a servant of rulers: "Kings will see, princes will stand up, and they will all bow down because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel — and he has chosen you...This is what the Lord says: I will answer you in a time of favor, and I will help you in the day of salvation. I will keep you, and I will appoint you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land, to make them possess the desolate inheritances...Shout for joy, you heavens! Earth, rejoice! Mountains break into joyful shouts! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his afflicted ones...Can a woman forget her nursing child, or lack compassion for the child of her womb? Even if these forget, yet I will not forget you. Look, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me...This is what the Lord God says: Look, I will lift up my hand to the nations, and raise my banner to the peoples. They will bring your sons in their arms, and your daughters will be carried on their shoulders. Kings will be your guardians and their queens your nursing mothers. They will bow down to you with their faces to the ground and lick the dust at your feet. Then you will know that I am the Lord; those who put their hope in me will not be put to shame...Then all humanity will know that I, the Lord, am your Savior, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob." (Isaiah 49:7-8, 13, 15-16, 22-23, 26 CSB)

I am not sure why we are so afraid to take God at His Word. I am not sure what makes us so uncomfortable with a God who feels so deeply. I get that God is "wholly other" and understand the need to make sure we aren't remaking God in our own image but God is the only One who gets to define Himself. He is in charge of His own self-revelation. And He clearly makes Himself known as a God of compassion.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 52-54, Psalms 119:97-128

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