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December 30, 2024

Genesis

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

Genesis = origin, creation, in the beginning. Studying the opening chapters of the Bible gives us a window into God's realm. It gives us a picture of what our world was intended to be. It gives us a glimpse of what our world one day will be when God Himself returns to make all things new. As such, it is worthy of our most intense study. This is the world our hearts long for. This is the world that echoes in our genetic memories. It's the world we were made for which is why our world feels so foreign, strange, and alien at times.

What is God's world like? It is a world of order. A world where everything has a purpose and place. The sun, moon, and stars in their courses above. The birds in the air. The fish in the sea. The mammals and insects and other creeping, crawling things on the earth. It's world full of life and beauty and biodiversity. Each plant and animal reproducing according to its kind. It is a world designed by God specifically for the enjoyment of humanity. The creatures He made in His own image. The creatures He set in the world to care and to keep and to steward it towards ever-greater heights of fruitfulness. Note how God carefully crafts the environment so that humanity can flourish. Light. Atmosphere. Land. Water. Flora and fauna. Animals galore. And God sets us in this world to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and exercise dominion over all He has made. Not domination. Dominion. This is a critical distinction. We are not set up as tyrants but as servants. We are not given authority to rule but to serve. The world doesn't exist for our pleasure alone but for the glory of God.

God's world is a community. It is the place where the dimensions of heaven and earth meet and God walks with us in the cool of the day. It is the place where God and humanity engage in deep, covenantal friendship as humanity lives out her purpose and obeys the commands of her Creator. It is the place where human beings find intimacy with other human beings. Adam and Eve. Bone of my bones. Flesh of my flesh. And all of it is good. Very good in fact. This is the world God designed. This is the world God desires.

Yes, we are far from this world. Yes, chapter three will bring disruption to this world. But today we sit, if but for a moment, and imagine the world as God intended it to be. A world without chaos, violence, injustice, suffering, or pain. A world of perfect peace and grace and generosity and service where those bearing the image of God perfectly serve their Creator with joy and satisfaction, stewarding the life of the garden God has planted. Partnering with God to help all of creation thrive. And so we join our voices with church since at least the 4th century singing the ancient hymn, Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. World without end. Amen. Amen.

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

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December 31, 2024

Word

Readings for today: John 1:1-3, Psalms 8, 104 (audio reading)

Words. Words are important. They are essential to communication. We use words to express ideas, give shape to thoughts, and bring definition to the world around us. We use words to convey meaning and purpose and values. Words have power. The power to hurt and the power to heal. The power to hinder and the power to help. The power to curse and the power to bless. When we use words well, the world around us experiences life and love and joy and peace. When we use words poorly, the world around us experiences death and hatred and grief and violence. Words are critical to understanding our world and our place in it. Words are vital in discerning truth. Words are the key to learning wisdom.

As important as our words are, they are ultimately finite. They are limited. They cannot begin to describe the majesty and glory of our Creator. Our words fail when it comes to describing God. We can use every word that has ever existed in every language throughout human history around the globe and still not scratch the surface of God. He is beyond human words and human expression and human language and human understanding. This is why we need the Word.

Word. The Word is different than human words. The Word is God's expression of Himself. God's revelation of Himself. God communicating Himself to us in a language we can understand. Jesus is the Word of God incarnate. The Word of God made flesh and blood. But He has always been the Word. He was present and active at creation, speaking the universe into existence. He was present and active even before creation, existing in eternal fellowship with the Father and the Holy Spirit. One God, Three Persons, Blessed Trinity. In the beginning was the Word. John is deliberately recalling the opening words of Genesis to convey a fundamental truth. The Word is God. The Word is with God. The Word is the Creator God. And all that has come into being was made by Him and through Him.

This is a stunning revelation. Almost all of the creation narratives of the religions of the ancient world involved a great war between good and evil. Good typically wins and dismembers evil, thus creating the world and all that is in it. Creation birthed in conflict. The universe formed by violent processes from the beginning. Much of modern science would agree though they would depersonalize and demythologize it. The Big Bang is a violent explosion that results in a rapid expansion of matter. Stars are formed when molecular clouds collapse under the weight of their own gravity thus creating the conditions for nuclear fusion. When massive stars reach the end of their lives, they can turn into black holes with a gravitational pull so intense nothing can escape, not even light itself. Meteors pummel moons and planets throughout our solar system. Asteroids cruise through the universe primed for collision. It's not a safe environment at all. So one can understand why the ancients believed what they believed.

This is what makes the creation story in the Bible so remarkable. God speaks the world into existence. God tames the chaos through Word not power. God makes everything good. God sets everything in order. God rests on the seventh day. There is nothing analogous to it in any other religion in the world. It's one of the many reasons to believe it is divine revelation not human myth. It's simply not credible to think that any human being or human society would come up with this on their own.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 3-5

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January 1, 2025

Communion

Readings for today: Genesis 3-5 (audio reading)

Communion. It's what God created in the beginning. Communion with Him. Communion with one another. Communion with the world He had made and all that is in it. Communion is a blessing. It is sweet and intimate. It connects us. It is marked by joyful and mutual submission. It serves as a blessing to all who enjoy it. It's a relationship that benefits everyone. When humanity lives in communion with God, we live openly, freely, transparently. We are protected from any kind of shame or guilt or coercion or manipulation. We have nothing to fear. Nothing to be anxious over. Nothing to worry about. And these benefits flow into the other relationships we enjoy in life. Relationships with family and friends. We find our communion with one another deepening and becoming more rich and full and sacred. Furthermore, these benefits convey to the work we do in the world. Our gratitude for the blessing of being able to enjoy and exercise dominion over all God has made. The land flourishes. Society thrives. God is honored. This is what God intends for us.

Alienation. Sadly, we chose to chart our own path. We chose to go our own way. We allowed the lust of the flesh - the fruit of the tree was good for food - and the lust of the eyes - the fruit of the tree was delightful to look at - and the pride of life - the fruit of the tree was desirable for obtaining wisdom - to warp our perspective. The result was alienation. We became alienated from God as we sought to hide from Him in the Garden. We became alienated from one another as we sought to shift the blame and entered into a power struggle. We became alienated from creation itself as it became resistant and hardened to our desire to exploit it for our own benefit. As one African theologian put it, this is what happens when we choose communion with the "ancient serpent" over communion with God.

Communion and alienation. We make choices every single day to pursue one or the other. From the moment we wake up in the morning until the moment we lay our head down at night, we are making decisions that lead to deeper communion with God, one another, and the world around us or greater alienation with the same. And we cannot claim ignorance. God has shown us what a life lived in perfect communion looks like in the Person of Jesus Christ. He has literally come to earth to show us the way. To mark the path. To map it out for us. The fundamental question for us is the same as it was for Adam and Eve. Will we believe God or will we trust the serpent? Will we trust God or will we trust ourselves to discern right from wrong, truth from error? Will we rely on the wisdom of God or will we seek to be wise in our own eyes?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 6-7

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January 2, 2025

Favor

Readings for today: Genesis 6-7 (audio reading)

Favor. It's a core human need. A primal desire within all of us. We all want to be looked on with favor. We all want the approval of others. We all want to be supported, blessed, encouraged, esteemed. A friend of mine reached out the other day. He's got an important interview next week. I told him I would pray for him to have favor with the interview team. Another friend is seeking to close on a home. She needs her mortgage application to come through. I told her I would pray for her to have favor with the lender. A couple I'm working with is struggling. One of the things I pray regularly over them is favor. I pray they would favor each other even as they seek the favor of one another.

Noah found favor with God. What an incredible statement. In the midst of all the pain and heartbreak in the world, one man still seeks God. One man still walks with God. One man is found righteous with God. Blameless in his generation. Does this mean Noah is perfect? Of course not. Part of our problem is we always think favor has to be earned. We think favor is something we achieve. If I do something for you, you will look with favor on me. But that's not really favor at all, is it? Not at least the way the Bible talks about favor. Favor flows from relationship. Favor is the natural response of God to a heart that is turned towards Him. Abel's heart was right with the Lord so He looked on his offering with favor. Noah's heart was right with the Lord so God chose Him to be a new Adam. As such, he represented a fresh start. A fresh start for humanity. A fresh start for the world.

How does one find favor with God? The same way Abel did. The same way Noah did. The same way all the saints of the Old and New Testaments did. By faith. We look to God by faith. We seek God by faith. We nurture a relationship with God by faith. We follow God by faith. We trust God by faith. We orient our hearts towards God by faith. A man named Augustine once wrote, "our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God." Restlessness is what happens when we aren't sure we are favored. When we aren't experiencing favor. When we have lost favor. It could be with our spouses or children or friends. It could be with colleagues at work or at school. It could be in our community. Most of all, our hearts will be restless until we find favor with God. Make it your aim in 2025 to seek favor with God above all else.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 8-9, Psalms 12

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January 3, 2025

Memory

Readings for today: Genesis 8-9, Psalms 12 (audio reading)

Remember. It's an important word. Even more, it's an important spiritual practice. As we begin a new year, it's important to look back on the previous year and remember all that God has done for us. Perhaps even make a list. Count our blessings. Recall to mind the number of ways God made Himself known to us in our struggle, heartache, grief, and pain. 2024 will forever be the year I lost my father. He died suddenly on a Saturday morning in March. As we gathered at the house to wait for the coroner to finish her work, I felt the presence of God. I remembered how God brought my father to faith when we were in Israel. I remembered his baptism in the Jordan River. I remembered the many ways God had softened his heart over the years. And I am thankful. 2024 is also the year my son left for college. I remembered the struggles we went through in high school. I remembered the challenges he overcame. I remembered the people God brought into his life to help him change. Grow in his self-confidence. And now he is launching out on his own. I am thankful.

And God remembered Noah. Does this mean God had forgotten? Noah and his family had slipped God's mind? God lost track of them as He ran the universe? Not at all. God remembered Noah is another way of saying "God was faithful to Noah." God would not forget Noah. God would remain true to His promise. The floodwaters recede. The earth reappears. The act of new creation is completed. Noah is given a renewed creation mandate to be fruitful and multiply. But I imagine the PTSD of what they went through was strong. So God gives them a sign. A rainbow in the clouds. Every time the clouds gather and they feel the fear inside - "is this going to be another flood?" - God makes the rainbow appear so they will not worry. They will know God has not forgotten His covenant. God will never again flood the earth in an act of judgment. "I have placed my bow in the clouds, and it will be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I form clouds over the earth and the bow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all the living creatures: water will never again become a flood to destroy every creature. The bow will be in the clouds, and I will look at it and remember the permanent covenant between God and all the living creatures on earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and every creature on earth." (Genesis 9:13-17 CSB)

What signs has God given us of His faithfulness? A child born in Bethlehem. The cross. The empty tomb. Jesus Christ is the ultimate sign that God will be faithful to His covenant. Jesus is the sign that God always remembers. He will not leave us or forsake us, much less forget us. He loves us with an everlasting love. He has made a permanent, eternal covenant with us through the blood of His Son. Seed time and harvest. Cold and heat. Summer and winter. Day and night. None of these shall pass away until God's covenant finally comes to completion when Jesus comes again in glory. Until that great day comes, we are called to remember God's covenantal works. Cling to God's covenantal signs. Trust God's covenantal love.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 10-11

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January 4, 2025

Family

Readings for today: Genesis 10-11 (audio reading)

God loves families. God created the first human family. He ordained the first human marriage. He created humanity to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth. So He commanded Adam and Eve. So He commanded Noah and his children. So He will command Abram and Sarai in just a few chapters. God's desire is for humanity to fill the earth. Rule in His name over all He has made. This is why the Tower of Babel is such a problem. The people would not scatter. They were refusing to "fill the earth." Instead, they sought to make a tower that would stretch to heavens. A physical signpost they could look to as they wandered so they always knew they would be safe. Much like ancient mariners who always tried to stay within sight of the coastline, the people were too scared to accomplish the mission God had set out for them. So God, in an act of grace, confused their languages and scattered them Himself. He pushed them out of the nest. And the people spread out across the globe, each developing their own language and customs. However, no matter how far afield they went, they still remained part of the same family. A family God loves with all His heart.

God loves the human family. In fact, He loves us so much He chose one particular family to bring about His covenant promise. They don't know it yet but God has great plans for them. If you stop at Genesis 11, there is nothing remarkable about this family that would suggest what's to come. Nothing foreshadowing the miracles and signs and wonders God will do in and through and for them. In fact, there are problems with this family. Sarai is barren so it seems the family name will be carried on through Nahor rather than Abram. Haran, the father of Terah, has died in Ur and something prompts Terah to take his clan to Haran. What it is, we don't know. God has yet to reveal it to us. While they settle in Haran, tragedy strikes again and Terah dies, leaving childless Abram and Sarai, along with Nahor and Milcah, to decide what to do next. Should they return to Ur? Stay in Haran? Continue on to Canaan? Again, if you don't know the story, these are open questions.

God loves the human family. God loves Abram and Sarai's family. God loves your family. Perhaps you're facing some open questions today? Perhaps the future of your family seems unclear? Perhaps you're wrestling over what to do next? A relocation? A career change? Kids leaving home? Parents moving into graduated care? There are so many open questions in life. The other day, one of my daughters left for Australia for six months. We put her on a plane with no idea what she will experience while she is over there. She is nineteen years old. So much of her life in front of her. So many different directions she could go. So many things she could see and do. We have no idea what God has waiting for her only that God IS waiting for her over there. And He will be faithful. Just as He was faithful to Abram and Sarai and all who have come before us.

Readings for tomorrow: No readings on Sundays

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January 6, 2025

I Will

Readings for today: Genesis 12-13 (audio reading)

I will. Such powerful words. Especially in a world where we too often expect “I won’t.” It’s one of the biggest lessons I’ve had to learn in my life. God’s will for me is good not evil. God’s will for me is blessing not curse. God’s will for me is joy not sorrow. God’s will for me is peace not conflict. God’s will for me is love not hate. God is positively disposed towards me. He wants to give me good gifts. He has an eternal inheritance stored up for me. He has a plan for me. A plan to give me hope and a future.

For most of my life, I believed God’s primary words to me were “I won’t.” You can’t. Thou shalt not. It shaped how I perceived God. I perceived God as a stern judge. A harsh taskmaster who didn’t tolerate failure. I had an unhealthy fear of the Lord. A relationship based on fear and shame and trembling. I assumed God punished me for every misstep. Every mistake. Every wrong turn. I assumed God was just waiting to cast me out. Send me to hell. Torment me eternally. The pressure to perform was immense. The pressure to be perfect was overwhelming. To be honest, I cratered under it. I collapsed. I couldn’t do it. I didn’t have the strength or ability to manage it. So I turned to all sorts of things to cope with my failure to live up to God’s commands. None of them satisfied. Not for very long. Then I heard the gospel for the first time. I heard about the unconditional love of God. The free gift of God’s grace. The infinite depths of God’s mercy. It was life-changing.

I cannot begin to express how much the shift from “I won’t” to “I will” impacts my life. Every morning I wake up and my first thought is to say “Good morning” to God. I sit quietly in the warmth of His presence. I sense His smile upon me. No matter what I am facing that particular day, I know my Father already knows and has it handled. I may not have it all figured out. I may not have the wisdom or strength to handle the challenges. But I walk with confidence because I know God’s power is made perfect in my weakness and He will work all things to my ultimate good.

Abram must have experienced something similar in his own life. Look at all the “I wills” in these two chapters. I will make you great. I will bless you. I will make your name great. I will give you this land. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth. These are powerful promises, especially for a man who has experienced so much grief and hardship in his life. A man whose wife is barren and whose future prospects seem dim. A man whose legacy will end with his death. Abram must have thought his life was full of “I won’ts.” But God was faithful. He turned Abram’s “I wonts” into “I wills” and the rest is salvation history. What would it look like for you to approach today with the understanding that God “wills” your good? Are you willing to trust Him?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 14-16

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January 7, 2025

Belief

Readings for today: Genesis 14-16 (audio reading)

What does it mean to believe God? Too often, we apply a modern lens to our reading and interpreting of Scripture. We fail to acknowledge that though the Bible was written for us, it was not written to us. It was written to a particular people who lived at a particular time in a particular culture with a particular worldview. One that is far different than our own. We live in a post-Enlightenment world. A world shaped and formed by rational processes. A culture built on the dictum, “I think therefore I am.” Therefore, when we talk about “belief”, we shift into the realm of philosophy. Abstractions. Theories. We ask a set of questions that would never have even crossed Abram’s mind. We ask things like, “Is there a god? How would I know? What evidence is there for or against god?” These questions are the hallmarks of what Charles Taylor calls the “disenchanted world.” A world where the bias is against God. A world where God has to prove His own existence. A material world where “reality” is confined to what our five senses can confirm.

Abram lived in a far different world. An “enchanted” world where the spiritual was just as “real” as the material. God was taken for granted. His existence provided the foundation for all of life. “Belief” in Abram’s world was not philosophical. Those questions were assumed. It was deeply practical. Abram didn’t just believe in God as an abstract concept. He trusted God with his life. He trusted God would make good on His promises. He was fully convinced God was able to do what He said He would do. So when God tells Abram he will have a son, Abram believes God. He trusts God. He puts it in the bank. And this is why Abram is declared righteous.

Faith does not make one perfect. Abram is obviously not a perfect man. One chapter after he is declared righteous for believing God will provide a child, he takes matters into his own hands. He grows impatient and decides to follow his own plan and the plans of his wife, Sarai. The Hagar/Ishmael story is a tragic one though God eventually brings good out of Abram’s sinful decision. Hagar will be saved. Ishmael will become great in his own right and the father of many nations. Sadly, many of those nations will become the blood enemies of the descendants of Isaac, the promised child. But still Abram is lifted up as righteous. And this is the insight that hit the Apostle Paul like a thunderbolt. His righteousness must come by faith not by sight. It must be dependent on Abram’s trust in the Lord not the works of his hands. Despite his many mistakes and failures, Abram truly believed God. He trusted God. He followed God. He put His life in God’s hands over and over again. This is what it means to believe in a biblical sense and it remains our challenge to this day.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 17-19

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January 8, 2025

Ishmael

Readings for today: Genesis 17-19 (audio reading)

You may be familiar with Dr. Martin Luther King's famous phrase, "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice." Though he found himself in the midst of a titanic struggle for civil rights in our country, he was confident God was on his side. Bending what humanity intended for evil for the ultimate good. I see a similar dynamic in play when I reflect on the life of Ishmael.

Born of a slave woman. Set aside in favor of another. Cast out of his home to die. Robbed of any inheritance due to the jealousy of another. The odds were stacked against Ishmael. He could easily have perished in an ancient near east context where internecine family rivalries could be fierce and bloody. Furthermore, he was the product of sin. Conceived due to Abram and Sarai's lack of faith. A potential threat to the covenantal promises of God. As such, he could easily have come under God's judgment. But the arc of God's grace is long. The wideness of God's mercy cannot be measured. The breadth and depth of God's love cannot be plumbed. So Ishmael is included in God's blessing. He is given his own set of promises. He will be fruitful and multiply. He will become the father of many tribes. He will become a great nation.

Ishmael is a great example of how God takes even our sinful human choices and bends them to His sovereign will. He can use even our lack of faith at times to bring about his purposes in the world. This is hard for us to understand. We too often believe the lie that there are some choices we cannot come back from. Some decisions that take us past the point of no return. Some sins that are more heinous than others that condemn us to hell. None of it is true. God's grace is greater than we can possibly imagine. It is greater than our greatest sin. It is greater than worst mistake. It is greater than any horrible decision we may make. It's why we sing, Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 20-23

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January 9, 2025

Promise

Readings for today: Genesis 20-23 (audio reading)

The theme of promise runs strong throughout the Bible. And perhaps surprisingly, it is God who makes most of the promises. Why might that be surprising? Because in an ancient near east culture, it was the subjects who made promises to the king, not the other way around. It was the lesser parties who made promises to the greater. The less powerful who served the powerful. Devotees of the pagan gods of the Canaanites made all kinds of promises to their gods when they offered their sacrifices with little to no guarantee of any return. But the God of the Bible is different. He is both the Promise-Maker and the Promise-Keeper. It's why the great 20th century rabbi, Abraham Heschel, once remarked that all human religions detail humanity's search for God but the Bible tells the story of "God's search for man."

Think about all the promises God has made humanity thus far. He made promises to Adam and Eve, even after they were cast out of the Garden. He made promises to Cain, even after he murdered his brother. He made promises to Noah and his family. He made promises to Abram and Sarai, in particular, the promise of a child. A son through whom God would work His great salvation plan. Yes, Abram and Sarai tried to take matters into their own hands with Ishmael and God was gracious. He blessed Ishmael but he wasn't the child that was promised. God will not allow anyone or anything to stop Him from delivering on His promises. So Isaac is born. Abraham is one hundred years old. Sarah is ninety. God turns Sarah's initial laughter at the absurdity of the idea of a child into joyful laughter as everyone who hears her story rejoices with her over what God has done.

Ephesians 3:20 says, "God is able to do far more than we can ever ask or imagine." I think this is why God is the one making all the promises in Scripture. Because we wouldn't even know where to begin. We don't know what to ask for much less have the imagination to comprehend all God has in store for us. Our minds are bounded by what's possible, meanwhile God promises the impossible. Our hearts are so easily discouraged when things don't go our way, meanwhile God is using all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. We are finite creatures who are limited to what we can see, touch, taste, hear, and smell. God is infinite and not subject to the laws of the universe He set in place. What God has promised, He will deliver. You can take it to the bank. In fact, this is the very definition of saving faith. Romans 4:21-22, "Abraham was fully convinced that what God had promised, he was also able to do. Therefore, it was credited to him for righteousness."

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 24-26

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January 10, 2025
Growing Old

Readings for today: Genesis 24-26 (audio reading)

I had the privilege this week of spending time with some of the most incredible pastors on the planet. They are committed and faithful and passionate about the Lord and the people they serve. Some are going through hard times. Some are experiencing seasons of great blessing. Some are young and just getting started in their professional career. Others are older and nearing the end of the road in their ministries. Some are middle-aged like me who are just beginning to realize there is more behind us than in front of us. It's sobering when you start to see the end. And I am thankful these pastors are aging with deep grace. They want to make sure those who come behind them are successful. They want the transition for their churches to be smooth. They are doing all they can to prepare themselves emotionally and spiritually for the day when they preach their final sermons.

I thought of these pastors as I reflected on the life of Abraham today. Our reading today says "Abraham was now old, getting on in years, and the Lord had blessed him in everything." (Genesis 24:1 CSB) It also says, "This is the length of Abraham's life: 175 years. He took his last breath and died at a good old age, old and contented, and he was gathered to his people." (Genesis 25:7-8 CSB) What a gift! Abraham finished his race, "old and contented." I can think of nothing better. As he looked back on his 175 years on earth, he could see God's blessing in everything. He recognized he had lived to a "good old age." He had been given more years than he deserved and lived more life than he could possibly expected. He had lived long enough to see his child, the child of promise, grow up. He had lived long enough to see his family and clan and tribe increase. He was wealthy in so many ways. Finally, at a specific time ordained by God, he was "gathered to his people." He died surrounded by those he loved.

I hope I am able to finish like Abraham. To grow old with grace and complete confidence in the plans and purposes of God. To finish my race knowing I am simply one small leg on a much longer course and my job is to pass the baton well. It's one of the many reasons why I appreciate the pastors I was with this week so much. They want to do the same. No matter how many years God gives us, there will come an eventual end. How are you preparing for that day? Have you entrusted it to God? Are you resisting growing old or embracing it, trusting God with what comes after you?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 27-29

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January 11, 2025

Deception

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

I flunked out of college after my sophomore year. Unfortunately, I couldn't go home because I was actively lying to my parents. I didn't tell them about my heavy drinking. I didn't tell them about my excessive partying. I didn't tell them I was skipping class and no longer showing up for my work study. And back in those days, they didn't really have any way to verify the truth of my story though I am sure they knew something wasn't right. The story they heard from me was that I was doing well but just wanted a year off. A "gap year" before gap years were popular. I would remain in Boulder and work and live before registering for school the following year. Sadly, one lie led to another and another. My relationships suffered. I began to feel isolated and alone. Sure, I covered well but I was dying inside. Finally, I came clean. First, to my girlfriend at the time. A godly woman who is now my wife. Then my close friends. Then my brothers. And last of all, my parents. Though it was freeing, it was a painful process. Eventually, we recovered but I had to work hard to regain their trust.

The first word that comes to mind when I think of Jacob is deception. Here was a young man who deceived his disabled father. Took advantage of his blindness to steal his older brother's birthright and blessing. Rather than come clean and face the music, he ran away from home under the auspices of "finding a wife." When he reached his uncle's home, he didn't share what happened but accepted his hospitality under false pretenses. Little did he know that he'd met his match. Two could play the "deception" game. So Laban was able to marry both his daughters off to Jacob and get fourteen years of labor in return. One can only imagine the impact both men's deception had on the family dynamic. Family meals must have been awkward affairs especially since Jacob favored Rachel over Leah. Then Leah began to have children while Rachel remained barren. More awkwardness that will lead to all kinds of competition and deception and accusations between the women. All part of the ripple effect of Jacob's initial sin.

How many of us have a similar story to tell? How many of us have felt the ripple effect of sin in our own lives? How many of us have experienced the pain that comes along with it? How many of us have lied or deceived those we loved only to find it backfiring on us later in life? It can be tempting in a moment to shade the truth. To exaggerate. To withhold a certain amount of information. Sometimes for what we may think are good reasons. But deception only leads us down roads with dead ends. We end up in cul-de-sac's of our own making. Life and relationships get stuck and don't go anywhere. And if, by the grace of God, we find a way through, it will not happen without a lot of pain and suffering. Much better to tell the truth. Live transparently and vulnerably and honestly before others.

Readings for tomorrow: No readings on Sundays

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January 13, 2025
Reconciliation

Readings for today: Genesis 30-33 (audio reading)

My dad died almost a year ago. We had a complex relationship. He was tough on me as his oldest son. He was a strict disciplinarian. A man you never said “no” to. He found it hard to express his feelings and emotions. Though he told me he loved me, he wasn’t overly demonstrative about it. Hugging was hard for him. He preferred critique over encouragement as a way to parent. He was also an alcoholic for almost forty years. Even though he was never physically abusive, he wasn’t easy to live with. When I moved back to Colorado over fifteen years ago, he was working at a golf course as a ranger. He and I were able to play regularly on the course. We had hours of conversation during those rounds. And God began to reconcile what I thought was irreconcilable. My father became more affectionate. He laughed easier. He told me how proud he was of me and the man I’d become. I was able to even confide in him at times and he offered me sound advice. About 18 months or so before he passed away, we took a trip to Israel together. My mom and my wife also were with us. I challenged him to make his peace with God. Once again, God worked a miracle. My father publicly proclaimed his faith in Jesus Christ and I had the privilege of baptizing him in the Jordan River. It was an experience I will never forget.

I imagine Jacob must have felt the same way when he met Esau. He had been gone for well over a decade. Plenty of time for Esau’s anger and hostility to ferment into something toxic and deadly. Indeed, if God wasn’t at work that’s exactly what would have happened. But as much as we read about God working in Jacob’s life, often despite his sin, He must have been working in Esau’s life as well. How else can one explain the greeting Jacob received upon returning home? “Esau ran to meet him, hugged him, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. Then they wept.” (Genesis 33:4 CSB) There’s no way to explain this miraculous reception other than God working in Esau’s heart to move him to forgiveness and reconciliation. And there’s nothing more powerful, more intimate, more life-changing than being on the receiving end of forgiveness and reconciliation whether it’s from God or those we love.

Think about your own life. Who do you need to forgive? Who do you need to ask forgiveness from? With whom do you need to reconcile? It may feel impossible. It may feel like the gulf is too wide. The hurt too deep. The disappointment too fresh. Everything in you may resist God’s call to lean in. But there’s nothing more powerful in the Christian life. Be strong and bold and courageous. Have faith. Trust the Holy Spirit. Reach out with open hands and an open heart. Pray fervently and regularly. Do all you can to make peace with God. Peace with others. Peace with the world.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 34-37

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January 14, 2025
Sin of Revenge

Readings for today: Genesis 34-37 (audio reading)

The desire for revenge can be strong. I think of a friend of mine whose father was murdered in cold blood. The killer was sent to prison for life without parole. For years, my friend brooded on his fate. He longed to avenge his father by taking this man's life. He would often fantasize about what he would do to him if he ever got the chance to meet him. Then he became a Christian. He realized his desire for revenge was a sin. "Vengeance is mine, says the Lord." He came to the conviction that only God has the right to take a life. Only God is just enough and righteous enough to exact vengeance for the wrongs that have been done. My friend eventually made an appointment to meet his father's killer in prison. Sat across the bullet proof glass from him. Picked up the phone and told the man he forgave him. Immediately the Holy Spirit came over him and he felt more freedom than he'd felt in years. He was released from bondage to his sin.

There is an ancient legal principle called "Lex Talionis" or the "law of retaliation." It originated in ancient Babylonian law and was eventually incorporated into Roman law and then into the legal systems of the West. It is also found in the ancient Code of Hammurabi and the Law of Moses as well. Essentially, it outlaws revenge. It makes justice proportional. Colloquially, it means "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Punishment is meted out in a way that corresponds to the original harm. I think of Don Corleone in the first Godfather movie who, when asked to murder the men who beat another man's daughter, refuses on the principle that she didn't die. He was employing "lex talionis."

One can see why such a law is necessary from our reading today. Left unrestrained, human beings will always seek revenge for the wrongs done to them or those they love. They will avenge their family name. They will defend their family honor. So when Dinah is raped, Simeon and Levi refuse to compromise. They want revenge and massacre an entire city in response. Not only that but they plundered the city, leaving nothing behind but an empty shell. It was brutal. It was swift. It was overwhelming. And now they have to deal with the fallout. What would happen if the survivors sought revenge on them? What about the relatives of the people they killed who lived in other cities and communities throughout the land? A vicious cycle could have been created that would threaten the promise of God should Jacob and his family suffer a similar fate. So now they have to move. Now they are on the run. And God protects them from their enemies in order to preserve their line and fulfill His promise to Abraham and Sarah.

Revenge is a sin because it creates a never-ending, always escalating cycle of violence. A harsh word is met by harsh actions. A painful experience is compounded by more pain and suffering. An attack is met by an even stronger attack. Eventually, it all leads to death. It could be the death of relationships. It could be the death of a community. It could be actual, physical death in some cases. This is why God makes an exclusive claim to the right for vengeance. He knows we cannot restrain ourselves and will lead to our destruction.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 38-40

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January 15, 2025
God is All You Need

Readings for today: Genesis 38-40 (audio reading)

The Lord was with Joseph. We hear that refrain over and over again in our reading today. The Lord was with Joseph so he found favor in the household of Potiphar. The Lord was with Joseph so everyone and everything in Potiphar's house prospered. The Lord was with Joseph so he was given more and more authority even though he was a Hebrew slave. The Lord was with Joseph and he gained favor with the prison warden. The Lord was with Joseph so he was put in a place of authority even as an inmate. The Lord was with Joseph so all he did was successful. The Lord was with Joseph.

At the same time, Joseph didn't have an easy life. He was enslaved. He was betrayed by his master's wife. He was false accused. He was imprisoned for holding fast to his integrity. He was a victim of gross injustice. He was forgotten by his fellow inmates even after he helped them by interpreting their dreams. Still he walked by faith. Still he trusted the Lord. One never gets the sense that Joseph is down or depressed or throws himself a pity party. He knew the Lord was with him and that was more than enough.

Do you believe God is all you need? Take a moment and reflect on the question. Don't rush to give the "right" answer. Pray over this question. Ask the Holy Spirit to probe your heart and reveal to you the truth of where you stand. If you believe God is all you need, then you can endure just about anything. You can make it through every difficult situation. You can persevere through tremendous suffering. You can find joy even in the midst of the deepest grief. You can lay your life down for those you love and those you live among. You can pour yourself out over and over again because you know God will be there to fill you back up. But if you don't believe God is all you need. If you aren't sure God is all you need. If there are things in your life that you simply cannot live without then you are in trouble. All it will take is one of those things to go away or be taken away and you will find yourself experiencing crushing disappointment.

So how does one get to a place in life where God truly is all they need? It's a process. It takes time. It takes intentionality. Presenting yourself daily before the Lord. Spending time with Him in His presence. Listening to Him speak through His Word. Asking Him to fill you with the Holy Spirit. Trusting Him to lead and guide you in every decision and in every situation. Do this day after day after day over the course of your life and you will find yourself believing God truly is all you need.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 41-43

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January 16, 2025
The Power of Guilt

Readings for today: Genesis 41-43 (audio reading)

Guilty conscience. We've all experienced it. In my work as a pastor, I have had hundreds, if not thousands, of conversations with people to help them process their guilt. Some are crippled by it. Some try to dismiss it. Others fall somewhere in between. Our experience of guilt often depends on our personality. Some are simply more conscientious than others. They tend to dwell on their mistakes. They struggle to forgive themselves or let go of the ways they've failed. Others find it easier to move on. They are not as self-aware. They often don't realize or take seriously the impact they have on others. Still others have a relatively healthy relationship with guilt. They feel it when they blow it but they are more than willing to ask for forgiveness. They are attuned to how their words or actions impact others and try to be sensitive to those around them. Then there are those few who don't experience guilt at all. This is actually a sign of a sociopathic or psychotic personality disorder. Guilt is not a bad thing. In fact, it's a good thing. It's a reminder to us that our words and actions matter. The impact of what we say and do follows us. When we fail to resolve hurt or pain or self-destructive choices, we will find ourselves haunted by guilt. This is God's way of reminding us and pushing us towards forgiveness and reconciliation.

Joseph's brothers were haunted by their guilt. I have always found it fascinating that their first response to being falsely accused is to trace it back to how they treated Joseph. Clearly, their actions had been haunting them for years. Perhaps it's because their father refused to resolve his grief. Perhaps it's because Reuben wouldn't let them forget it. Whatever the reason, they clearly suffered from a guilty conscience and it had a ripple effect across their family system. It created all kinds of brokenness and division among them. It fostered an environment of fear and shame. They return home and Jacob blames them for the loss of his sons. Reuben offers his own sons as a sacrifice. Does he seriously think Jacob will kill his own grandsons in his grief? Finally, Jacob threatens them with his own potential death. The whole scene is heartbreaking and a clear example of the impact of our sinful choices.

There is only one way to heal a guilty conscience. Forgiveness. Repentance. Reconciliation. This is the only way to be set free from the mistakes of our past. It's the only way to move beyond our failures. It's the only way to find peace with God, with others, and most importantly, ourselves. Spend some time today reflecting on your life. Are there memories that haunt you? Recurring nightmares that cause you anxiety? Relational brokenness you know you need to resolve? Are there choices you're making right now that you know are sinful? Where do you need to repent and return back to God in your life? God wants you to live a life of freedom. But freedom only comes when we follow His ways.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 44-46

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January 17, 2025

Forgiveness

Readings for today: Genesis 44-46 (audio reading)

What is forgiveness? It's a question I get a lot along with "how do I forgive?" Some believe forgiving means forgetting. Some believe forgiveness means giving people a pass. Some believe forgiveness is weak and foolish and naive and only enables people to walk all over you. Some believe forgiveness is impossible. Some believe forgiveness means the resolution of all feelings. Some believe forgiveness is the same as reconciliation. None of these is true. Forgiveness, biblically defined, is the decision to let go of all anger and resentment against a person or persons who have hurt you and no longer hold their actions against them. We see this modeled so well in the life of Joseph.

"Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please, come near me," and they came near. "I am Joseph, your brother," he said, "the one you sold into Egypt. And now don't be grieved or angry with yourselves for selling me here, because God sent me ahead of you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there will be five more years without plowing or harvesting. God sent me ahead of you to establish you as a remnant within the land and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. Therefore it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, Lord of his entire household, and ruler over all the land of Egypt." (Genesis 45:4-8 CSB)

Note that Joseph is clear and honest about what happened. "You sold me into slavery in Egypt." There is no hiding from the truth. There is no attempt to skip over the truth. There is no pretending the truth of what happened has been forgotten. At the same time, Joseph has clearly made the decision to not hold the truth of what happened all those years ago against his brothers. "Do not be grieved or angry with yourselves for selling me here." Joseph releases them from their guilt. He refuses to hold what happened against them. He had let go of any anger or bitterness years before. And how did Joseph do that? He looked to God. He trusted God's sovereign plan for his life. He knew God was able to work all things for his good and the good of His people. "God sent me ahead of you to preserve life." Joseph's life. The lives of the Egyptians. The lives of Jacob and Joseph's brothers and the rest of his family. Joseph believed God had a plan. In fact, he saw what happened as the fulfillment of the prophetic dreams he had had years before. He knew God was at work the very first time his brothers showed up. And because of that, he could forgive. He could release his rightful claim to justice and instead offer them grace.

Now let's get practical. How can you practice forgiveness in your own life? Start with honesty. Start with honestly acknowledging the truth of what happened. Don't shy away from it. Don't back down from it. Just don't hold onto it and allow it to morph into bitterness. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Ask Him to show you how what happened is part of His overall plan for your life. Think about how God revealed Himself to you in the midst of your pain and suffering and heartbreak. Let His Spirit release you from your need for vengeance. Extend grace. Let the other person or persons know you trust God's plan. You trust what they may have meant for evil, God turned to good. Not just your good but their good as well.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 47-50

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January 18, 2025

Pilgrimage

Readings for today: Genesis 47-50 (audio reading)

Life is a pilgrimage. It's a journey from birth to death and beyond. Like any pilgrimage, it is filled with highs and lows. Ups and downs. We love. We hate. We rejoice. We grieve. We hurt. We heal. We learn. We forget. We grow strong. We grow weak. Through it all, we are not alone. God is on the journey with us. From the moment, humanity was exiled from the Garden, God went into exile as well. He left His home to come to be with us. To come to dwell with us. To come on the pilgrimage with us. That's the main message of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. It's the story - in Abraham Heschel's majestic words - of "God in search of man." He seeks us out. He will not allow us to remain lost. He will not allow us to wander aimlessly forever. He reveals Himself in the glory of creation, creating a hunger in the hearts of all people for eternity. He reveals Himself in His Word, leading all people everywhere to salvation. And He promises to take all the experiences of our pilgrimage - good, bad, or otherwise - and use them to shape and form and fashion us into the image of Christ and draw us to Himself.

This is what God did for Jacob. The years of Jacob's pilgrimage were hard. They were filled with all kinds of deception, conflict, grief, pain, heartbreak, and suffering. Jacob wrestled with God, not just down by a river one day but throughout his life. I can identify with him in that wrestling. I too have wrestled with God. I've wrestled with God over many things in my life. The days of my pilgrimage have not always been easy. I've lived in poverty. I've lived with an addict. I've lived with shame and guilt over decisions I've made or things I've done. I've had to fight and battle to get to where I am today. My body hurts every day. I live in fear that the neurological diseases in my family tree will one day catch up to me. My emotions are locked down deep and hard to access. But God has been with me every step of the way. He was with me even when I didn't know Him or couldn't see Him. He radically changed the course of my life in college. He has filled me and sustained me and strengthened me along the way. He has preserved me and provided for me and healed me and comforted me and blessed me. He has led me and guided me and used me to advance His Kingdom in the world in more ways than I can possibly count. As I look back, I am thankful. As I look forward, I am excited. As I think about where I am today, my heart is filled with gratitude.

How do you feel about your pilgrimage? Are you like Jacob? Are you disappointed as you look back? "My years have been few and hard and they have not reached the years of my ancestors during their pilgrimages." (Genesis 47:9 CSB) Is that your assessment? You don't measure up to those who came before you? Your life hasn't been good? Your years have been few and hard and are passing too quickly? Or do you take a different view? Think about all God did for Jacob and yet not one word from him about any of it when he stood before Pharaoh. Think about all the promises God made Jacob and all the blessings He poured into his life and yet Jacob's despair clouded his view and he couldn't see it. Not here. Not at the end of his life. Don't let despair cloud your view, friends! Spend time today reflecting on God's love for you. God's faithfulness to you. God's promises to you and how He has fulfilled them in your life. Most of all, trust Him with what's left of your pilgrimage.

Readings for tomorrow: No readings on Sundays

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January 20, 2025

Integrity

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

Job was a man of complete integrity. I have long pondered what this might mean. Does it mean Job is perfect? Free from sin? Clearly not. The Bible declares that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and this would include a man like Job. Does it mean Job never makes mistakes? Never gets things wrong? Never loses heart? Again, clearly not. The rest of the book show Job at his most honest and raw and real. He grieves. He laments. He argues. He fights back. He questions God. So what does it mean that Job was a man of complete integrity? A man who feared God and turned away from evil? A man who retains his integrity even in the middle of incredible tragedy? A man who accepts both good and adversity from God? A man who understands God gives and takes away?

The Hebrew word that is translated “complete integrity” or “blameless and upright” depending on which version you are reading, literally means to walk a straight path. It means there is no swerving to the left or the right. No crookedness along the way. It is the Bible’s way of picturing a person of honesty. A person who lives transparently before the Lord and before others. A person who has nothing to hide and nothing to be ashamed of and nothing to fear but God. Such a person sets their mind and heart on God. They seek to honor God in all their ways. They seek to obey God in everything they do. They bring God into the equation in all their decision-making. They trust God with the outcomes of life. They do not expect anything from God. They do not demand anything from God. They walk in humility before Him. They believe God is more than enough.

Decades ago, I was in a Bible study on the Book of Job and the teacher challenged us with some hard questions. If you never received anything from God, would He still be worthy of your worship? If you never received a single blessing from God, would He still be worthy of your devotion? Do you love God simply because He’s God or do you love God for the blessings He brings to your life? How would you answer? I know I had to sit with them a while myself. I wasn’t at a stage where I was ready to accept what Job had to teach me. I was still very young in my faith. But as I’ve grown over the years and experienced a whole lot of life along the way, I have learned to embrace the truth of what Job teaches us. God is enough. God is more than enough. He is worthy of my worship and devotion simply because He is God. He does not owe me. I have no right to expect anything from Him. Everything I receive from Him is a gift. It is grace. It is undeserved and unexpected and unearned. It is mine to steward not to own. He gives and takes away according to His perfect will for me. In all things and in every season, I bless the name of the Lord.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 6-9

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January 21, 2025

Grief

Readings for today: Job 6-9 (audio reading)

I had breakfast with my mom yesterday morning. We've been having breakfast once a month since right before my father died. We talk about a lot of things. We talk about her friends. We talk about her activities. We talk about our extended family. Most of all, we talk about grief. We talk about the challenges of learning to live alone. Things like starting a fire in the fireplace on a cold evening. Taking the dog on a walk. Fixing little stuff around the house. Things my father always did. We talk about the challenges of cleaning out the house. Letting go of things that remind her of dad. Going through boxes and processing all the memories. Giving away clothes and tools and other things that she no longer has a use for. It's not easy. There is a weight to it all.

I love how Job talks about his grief. "If only my grief could be weighed and my devastation placed with it on the scales." (Job 6:2 CSB) It's one of the most powerful descriptions I ever seen. It fits what I know about grief. It's an emotion I am well-acquainted with because of the work I do. I am a pastor. As such, I am often invited to share the grief of those I serve. It may be grief over the passing of a loved one. Grief over the death of a dream. Grief over the loss of a friendship. Grief over the end of a season. Sometimes the grief feels bittersweet like when someone we love dies after living a long and full life. Sometimes the grief feels overwhelming and hard as in the case of a tragedy. I have sat at so many bedsides over the years, gone to many homes, and spent countless hours listening as people processed what they were feeling. All of it a sacred privilege even though the grief is often heavy. Job's experienced unimaginable grief. The suddenness of it came upon him like a storm. The enormity of it hit him like a ton of bricks. I think that's why so many appreciate this book. It is raw. It is real. And it resonates deeply with those who have walked a similar road.

Why? It's a question I hear often in the midst of grief. Why did this happen? Why did this happen now? Why did this happen to this particular person? Why did this happen in this particular way? I hear echoes of these questions throughout the Book of Job as he tries to process his pain. Though Job never does get an answer, he keeps coming back to faith. He keeps drawing on the well that has sustained his life. It's a powerful reminder that true faith invites the deepest of questions. True faith is not afraid to express doubt or fear. True faith understands that it is our questions, doubts, and fears that ultimately lead us back to God. Listen again to our brother Job, "God is wise and all-powerful. Who has opposed him and come out unharmed? He removes mountains without their knowledge, overturning them in his anger. He shakes the earth from its place so that its pillars tremble. He commands the sun not to shine and seals off the stars. He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea. He makes the stars: the Bear, Orion, the Pleiades, and the constellations of the southern sky. He does great and unsearchable things, wonders without number." (Job 9:4-10 CSB)

Readings for tomorrow: Job 10-13

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January 22, 2025

Darkness

Readings for today: Job 10-13 (audio reading)

The darkness in the valley of the shadow is deep. It descends like a thick shroud, clouding the view. It feels impenetrable, leading to depression and despair, hopelessness and helplessness. I have walked through this valley so many times over the years. I have had seasons in my own life where I struggled to find my way back to the light. I have walked with friends and loved ones as they traveled the road. Sometimes it was mental health issues. Sometimes it was terminal disease. Sometimes it was deep grief. Sometimes it was death itself. I remember praying at the bedside of a dear friend a few years ago. He was an alcoholic. He struggled with all kinds of health complications as a result. He was an extremely successful businessman who had sacrificed his family along the way. He lived with a tremendous amount of guilt and shame. As he lay there dying, I could feel the darkness closing in. For a few moments, I felt hopeless and helpless and all alone.

It seems clear to me from today's reading that Job too has walked this road. He knows every twist and turn in the valley of the shadow of death. Listen to how he describes his experience, "It is a land of blackness like the deepest darkness, gloomy and chaotic, where even the light is like the darkness." (Job 10:22 CSB) That sounds about right. It certainly squares with my experience. A land of blackness. A land of deepest darkness. A land that is gloomy and chaotic. A land where even the light cannot escape. It's like a black hole emotionally, spiritually, and physically. But even here we can turn to God. Even here we can hold onto faith. Listen to Job again, "Be quiet, and I will speak. Let whatever comes happen to me. I will put myself at risk and take my life in my own hands. Even if he kills me, I will hope in him. I will still defend my ways before him. Yes, this will result in my deliverance, for no godless person can appear before him." (Job 13:13-16 CSB) Everything has been stripped away from Job. His life has been taken down to the studs. And when Job finds himself sitting in the ruins of his life, who does he find there sitting with him? God. God is all Job has left and even if he loses his life, he will still trust in Him. Still hope in Him.

Thankfully, my friend gave his life to Christ right before he died. In that moment, I felt the darkness lift though death was near. Hope and peace flooded my friend's soul as he realized he had been forgiven. It was one of the more powerful moments in my life. I will never forget it. It serves as a great reminder when I am walking through my own valley. I need fear no evil or darkness or chaos or despair for God is with me. He is there to comfort and guide me. He is there to prepare a celebration for me even in the face of all my enemies.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 14-17

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January 23, 2025
Slow to Talk

Readings for today: Job 14-17 (audio reading)

When I was young, someone told me I had two ears and one mouth for a reason. I should listen at least twice as much as I speak. Unfortunately, I have been known to violate that principle over the years. When I first became a pastor, I thought I needed to offer a lot of theological wisdom. Especially when people were hurting or suffering or dealing with end of life issues. I thought I was being helpful by trying to answer their questions. Explain the “why” behind the “what.” I could not have been more wrong. I could not have been more foolish. What they needed was someone to listen. Someone to sit with them in the ashes and weep with them. Someone to simply be present.

Job’s friends started off so well. They came to Job in his pain. They sat with him for days in silence. They brought the comfort through their presence. Eventually Job started to give words to what he was feeling. He was raw. He was angry. He was full of despair. It had to be hard to listen to. I know because I’ve been there. It’s so tempting in those moments to try to offer answers. But Job’s not really looking for answers. Sadly, Job’s friends can’t resist. They feel the need to explain to Job why he finds himself in such a terrible state. They begin to argue with Job which only compounds his pain. Things get so bad, Job lashes out. “I have heard many things like these. You are all miserable comforters. Is there no end to your empty words? What provokes you that you continue testifying?” (Job 16:2-3 CSB)

Empty words. I have offered them far too much over the years. I had the best of intentions. I truly wanted to offer comfort and peace. But that’s not mine to offer. Only God can grant comfort to those who are hurting and suffering. Only God can bring peace to those who find themselves struggling so much. Only can God can fill the emptiness those who are grieving often feel in their hearts. It’s much better to sit in silence than to speak. To say “I don’t know” rather than speculate on why something happened. The next time you feel tempted to speak into someone else’s pain, remember these words, “Does a wise man answer with empty counsel or fill himself with the hot east wind? Should he argue with useless talk or with words that serve no good purpose?” (Job 15:2-3 CSB)

Readings for tomorrow: Job 18-21

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January 24, 2025
Vindication

Readings for today: Job 18-21 (audio reading)

In the midst of his terrible suffering, Job holds fast to three fundamental convictions...

God is sovereign.

God is good and just.

Job is faithful.

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Job 22-24

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January 25, 2025
The Absence of God

Readings for today: Job 22-24 (audio reading)

There is nothing more terrifying than the feeling of existential loneliness. The belief that I am all alone in the universe. A cosmic accident. A product of random, impersonal forces. A collection of atoms. No divine purpose. No human dignity. No moral center. Recently a friend of mine challenged me with this question, “When was the last time you knew Jesus was real and this wasn’t all just a bunch of b**sh**t?” Such a great question. One that deserves a thoughtful answer. I told him about a time three years ago when I was in a rural area in the Horn of Africa. Suffering from jet lag. Lying awake on a hard bed praying for someone I loved dearly who was fighting an incredible battle. After exhausting all my words, I finally gave up and cried out to God, “Jesus, I just don’t have any more words to pray.” In that moment, I experienced the Holy Spirit coming over me in a powerful way. He began to pray for me according to His promise in Romans 8:26. I was overwhelmed. Unable to move for about an hour. At the end of that time, I found myself weeping in relief at the palpable presence of God in my life.

At the same time, I have also had moments where I experienced God’s absence. Much like Job, I didn’t know where to find Him. I couldn’t perceive Him. My prayers felt like they were bouncing off the ceiling. Perhaps that’s why I resonate so deeply with the words we read today, “If only I knew how to find him, so that I could go to his throne. I would plead my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments...If I go east, he is not there, and if I go west, I cannot perceive him. When he is at work to the north, I cannot see him; when he turns south, I cannot find him. Yet he knows the way I have taken; when he has tested me, I will emerge as pure gold.” (Job 23:3-4, 8-10 CSB) Historically, these moments are called the “dark night of the soul.” Moments in a person’s life where they find themselves wandering in deep darkness. Hopeless. Helpless. Despairing. They can last for days, months, or even years. And, as I said above, there is nothing more terrifying than feeling like you’ve been abandoned by God. It’s why Jesus’ cry from the cross is so horrible. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The experience of God-forsakenness is a taste of hell on earth. It’s not something I would wish on anybody, not even my worst enemy. But it is the experience of Job. And what makes Job such a profound example of faith is that He is somehow able to hold onto God even when he cannot find Him. He is able to follow God even when he cannot see Him. He is able to trust God even when he cannot feel Him. It’s why he says at the end of his own cry of dereliction, “Yet He knows the way I have taken; when He has tested me, I will emerge as pure gold.” What a testimony of faith!

Every Christian I have ever known has suffered a dark night of the soul. Every Christian I have ever known has walked through the valley of the shadow of death. Every Christian I have ever known has experienced the absence of God in certain seasons of life. The key in those moments is to trust God even when we cannot see Him or sense Him or feel Him or perceive Him. Our faith must transcend beyond our five senses. We must believe in the midst of our doubts and questions and fears. We must remain convinced that God will fulfill His promises though it may not be according to our time or according to our plan. This is the essence of true saving faith.

Readings for tomorrow: No readings on Sundays

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January 27, 2025
Self Worth

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

I have known people like Bildad. People who believe human beings are worms. Maggots. Vile, wretched creatures unworthy of God's attention. Unfortunately, there are theological traditions in the Christian faith that promote such beliefs. In their zeal to underscore the vast chasm that exists between human beings and God, they lift up verses like the one from Job 25 today. "How can a human be justified before God? How can one born of woman be pure? If even the moon does not shine and the stars are not pure in his sight, how much less a human, who is a maggot, a son of man, who is a worm!" (Job 25:4-6 CSB) On some level, they are right but they are also only telling half the story. And half a truth is no truth at all. Yes, when compared to God, we are impure. We are unrighteous. We are unholy. This is why it is impossible to justify ourselves before Him. At the same time, we've been made a little lower than the angels. God loved us so much, He gave His only Son for us. God predestined us in love before the foundations of the world to be His children. Adopted into His family. Given all the rights and privileges therein. This is the beauty and the glory of the gospel. God sees our sin. He sees it all. There is nothing hidden from Him. Nothing to justify us in His sight. So He does for us what we cannot. He justifies us through His Son. He clothes us in His own righteousness. He sanctifies us by His own Spirit.

The gospel is the wisdom of God. It is the foolishness of God that confounds the wise. It is the weakness of God that overcomes the strong. It is the death of God that offers eternal life to the world. This is why it is impossible for us to find such wisdom on our own. It is antithetical to our nature. It cuts against the grain of our human experience. It requires us to find our self-worth in self-denial. It requires us to base our self-esteem on serving others. It requires us to give in order to receive. To love rather than seek to be loved. It crosses all boundaries. It breaks down all barriers. It tears down all the dividing walls of hostility that separate us from God and from one another. The history of humanity is a history of violence and suffering and pain. Much of it self-inflicted. As a species, we are naturally greedy and jealous and violent and angry and selfish. This maps out in how we choose to spend our time and energy and resources and who we choose to spend it with. It's why tribalism is so rampant across the globe. But God offers us a different way. A narrow way. A way that leads to true joy, true peace, true love, and true fulfillment. This is the way Job is seeking amidst all he has suffered. Listen to his words again as things are starting to become more clear to him. "He said to humankind, "The fear of the Lord that is wisdom. And to turn from evil is understanding." (Job 28:28 CSB)

How are you living in the fear of the Lord today? How are you walking in the way of Jesus today? Are you living according to divine wisdom or your own wisdom? Are you living empowered by divine strength or your own strength? Are you seeking to turn from evil and sin in your life or are you trusting what feels good and seems good to you? The only way to discover your true worth is to find it in Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 29-32

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January 28, 2025
Final Appeal

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

Today we come to Job's final appeal. He has come to the end of himself. He has nothing left. Nowhere else to go. No one else to turn to. He has hit rock bottom. He looks back with longing for the days when things were good. When he walked closely with God. When he was respected in the community. When he was able to be generous to others. When he had the energy and the resources to help others. He was sure this was how his days would end. He was sure his future was secure. But then calamity struck. His fortunes took a turn for the worse. His reputation in the community suffered a mortal blow. Now the very same people who used to love and respect him, mock him. The very same people he helped and served along the way now rise up against him. His life has been poured out. His energy and resources utterly depleted. His expectations of a long and fruitful life dashed. He's tried crying out to God but to no avail. There seems to be no answer. Heaven is closed. He is alone. The walls have closed in all around him. There is no one to give him any comfort or any relief.

Have you ever hit rock bottom? Have you ever found yourself in a place where you feel like the walls are closing in? No one is left to help you? No one is left to comfort you? Not even God? In the summer of 2009 and into the fall, I found myself in such a place. The ministry I was leading had imploded, costing me several relationships. It was the most painful experience of my life. Members of my board threatened me. Those I considered friends abandoned me. My relationships at home with my wife and children were strained at best. I was not handling it well. I made so many mistakes during that time. I tried as hard as I could to redeem the situation in my own strength. But the harder I tried, the worse things got. I too cried out to God but to no avail. There seemingly was no answer. Heaven felt closed to me. My prayers bounced off the ceiling. Finally, after months of spending hours in prayer in the night, long after my family had gone to bed, I broke down. I wept. I told God I had nothing left. I finally surrendered. And I discovered God had been there all along. I just couldn't sense Him in my pain and brokenness and sin.

"The words of Job are concluded." (Job 31:40) This is a good thing. It's always good to exhaust our words so we can begin listening for God's Word. It's always good to shut our mouths so we can open our ears. It's always good to come to the end of ourselves so we can find a new beginning with God. Over the course of my life, I have found God does His best work in the empty spaces of my life when I have nothing left to give. So make your final appeal. Cry out to God with all you've got. Exhaust yourself and your energy and your resources assailing the heavens. Know that God is with you even as you do and when you are finished, He will speak. He will comfort. He will guide.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 33-36

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January 29, 2025
Chronological Snobbery

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

Elihu is a strange figure in Job. He appears seemingly out of nowhere and disappears just as quickly. He is not mentioned at the end of the book when God judges Job's three other friends and commands Job to pray and offer sacrifices for them. This leads some scholars to believe the Elihu discourse is a later addition to the text. However, I think Elihu is there to represent the folly of youth. The latent chronological snobbery that all of us engage in when we are young and think we have all the right answers. Elihu doesn't add much to the equation except to repeat the tired old argument that suffering is the direct consequence of human sin. There must be something Job has done to deserve his fate. His words, though perhaps asserted with more certainty, ring just as hollow as the others who have come to "comfort" Job.

I have raised four great kids. Four great humans who are making a difference in our world. I am so proud of each of them but it's not always been easy. There were seasons, especially when they were in high school, when I went from the smartest man they knew to the dumbest. Almost overnight. Everything was an argument. I could say black and they would say white. I could say night and they would say day. I could say the sky is blue and they would say it's actually a "blueish purple" but we only perceive it as blue because of how the wavelengths are impacted by the Earth's atmosphere. If you've ever been the parent of a teenager, I am sure you understand. I remember one conversation where my oldest daughter was trying to convince me of the virtues of communism as a political philosophy. I had to remind myself over and over again that she had never seen the Berlin Wall fall. She had never experienced the Cold War. She had not yet studied the history of the 20th century where millions lost their lives under Communist regimes. Eventually, I told her I could introduce her to someone who had experienced the "virtues" of communism firsthand. A friend of mine who is a survivor of the "Killing Fields" of Pol Pot in Cambodia. This sobered her up a bit and it reminded me yet again of the folly of youth.

I was much the same way at her age. Convinced of my own righteousness. Utterly certain of my own thoughts and ideas. I engaged in all kinds of chronological snobbery as I dismissed the wisdom of those who came before me. Thankfully, life taught me some hard lessons. I've been humbled in any number of ways. I've learned to value the wisdom of those who've come before me and listen to their words. I've learned to not take myself too seriously or falsely assume I bring anything new to the table. I don't. A wise man once said, "There's nothing new under the sun." I agree. Humanity seems forever locked in a cycle of "wash, rinse, repeat." Our addiction to sin can only be broken by the power of the gospel. What Elihu and Job's other friends need is a fresh encounter with God and a reminder that no one speaks for God except God Himself.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 37-40:5, Psalms 19

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January 30, 2025
Insignificance

Readings for today: Job 37-40:5, Psalms 19 (audio reading)

It is good to acknowledge our insignificance. It is good to understand our place in society, our place in the world, our place in the universe, our place in God's eternal plan. We are so very small. So very weak. So very ignorant. We do begin to see even the edges of God's ways. We see barely a fraction of what He sees and we understand even less. We are so limited. So finite. We don't even know how to think rationally or process our emotions in a healthy way or search the recesses of our own hearts much less grasp the mysteries of the universe. Who are we to judge God? Who are we to question His ways? Who are we to argue with Him over justice and righteousness and the affairs of the world and the meaning of human suffering? Even the fact that we think we have the standing to ask these questions of the Creator of the universe betrays our arrogance. We are foolish. We are ignorant. And deep down we all know it.

Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu have all had their turn. They've all taken their best shot to explain why Job is suffering so much. They've all tried to answer Job's questions. They've all done their best to defend God. But God doesn't need our defense. God doesn't need us to speak for Him. God doesn't need to explain Himself to us. He is God. We are not. And He reminds Job and his friends of this reality as He speaks to them from the whirlwind. "Then the Lord answered Job from the whirlwind. He said: Who is this who obscures my counsel with ignorant words? Get ready to answer me like a man; when I question you, you will inform me. Where were you when I established the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding." (Job 38:1-4 CSB) Right from the jump, God puts Job in his place. It's tempting to read anger into God's words. Frustration. But that would be a projection. There is nothing here to indicate God is speaking out of wrath. He simply is reminding Job of how little he knows and understands.

Thankfully, Job responds with humility. He acknowledges his foolishness. He places his hand over his mouth. He refuses to speak again. All his protestations have gone silent. All his demands fall to the wayside as he falls on his face before the Lord in worship. "The Lord answered Job: Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who argues with God give an answer. Then Job answered the Lord: I am so insignificant. How can I answer you? I place my hand over my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not reply; twice, but now I can add nothing." (Job 40:1-5 CSB) Here we see Job's heart. Here we see Job's character revealed. Job has never wavered in his love for God. Never wavered in his fear of God. Though he cried out to God in the midst of his pain and suffering, he never sins. He never curses God. And when God finally answers. When God finally shows up on the scene to confront Job. Job does what he always does. Job does what he's done his whole life. He worships.

At the end of the day, all of us have to decide if we can trust God. Do we trust His plan for our lives and for our world? Do we trust His goodness even when it doesn't make sense? Do we trust His righteousness even when we don't understand? Do we trust Him to be faithful even when we are suffering? Listen again to the words of the Psalmist and ask the Holy Spirit to give you the faith to believe even in those seasons when you might be experiencing unbelief or doubts or questions or fears. "The instruction of the Lord is perfect, renewing one's life; the testimony of the Lord is trustworthy, making the inexperienced wise. The precepts of the Lord are right, making the heart glad; the command of the Lord is radiant, making the eyes light up. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are reliable and altogether righteous." (Psalms 19:7-9 CSB)

Readings for tomorrow: Job 40:6-42, Psalms 29

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January 31, 2025

Weakness

Readings for today: [Job 40:6-42, Psalms 29](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

I remember the first time we took my son to the beach. We had just moved to Mobile, AL. He was all of two years old. When we crested the dune and looked out over the Gulf of Mexico, he got so excited. He started to run as fast as his little legs would take him to the water. All of a sudden, it dawned on him that the water was moving. Wave after wave was crashing in. He stopped in his tracks. Put his little arms out and started yelling, “You stop! You stop!” And then he began to cry as he realized the wind and the waves wouldn’t listen. I chuckled as I picked him up. We went into the water together. But I’ve often reflected back on that moment. What my son experienced there was utter powerlessness. Especially in the face of something awesome like an ocean. I’ve felt similarly when I look up in the night sky and see the stars. When I’m standing on top of a fourteen thousand foot mountain in the Rockies. When I’m in a rural village in the middle of nowhere on the other side of the world. It’s those moments when I truly understand how small and weak and insignificant I am.

Job has a similar moment when he encounters God. For almost forty chapters, he’s been crying for justice. Demanding God answer him and give an account for why everything has happened to him. He’s sat in sackcloth and ashes. He’s scraped his skin with broken pottery. His wife has cursed him. His friends have offered little consolation. He feels so alone. And then, amazingly, God does show up. But not to answer Job. Instead, God reminds him of his place in the world. His powerlessness. His helplessness. His finiteness. “Would you really challenge my justice? Would you declare me guilty to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God’s? Can you thunder with a voice like his? Adorn yourself with majesty and splendor, and clothe yourself with honor and glory. Pour out your raging anger; look on every proud person and humiliate him. Look on every proud person and humble him; trample the wicked where they stand. Hide them together in the dust; imprison them in the grave. Then I will confess to you that your own right hand can deliver you.” (Job 40:8-14 CSB) It’s a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God. To be given a sober reminder of how little authority we actually have in this world. We are utterly unable to clothe ourselves with splendor and glory. Helpless to trample the wicked where they stand or humble the proud. Job wasn’t able to save his children. Job wasn’t able to exact retribution on those who killed his servants and stole his livestock. Job wasn’t able to heal himself from the disease that afflicted him. In short, Job had absolutely no power or authority to deliver himself much less challenge God.

The same is true for us. I think this is why the Psalmist declares, “The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned, King forever. The Lord gives his people strength; the Lord blesses his people with peace.” (Psalms 29:10-11 CSB) Everything we have comes from the Lord. It is God who works in us both to will and to work according to His good pleasure. It is only through Christ and His wisdom and strength that we can meet and overcome the challenges of our world. It is God who gives us a hope and a future as we follow His plan for our lives. It is God’s power that is made perfect in our weakness. So rather than grumble and complain all the time, we should be thankful. Thankful in the good times. Thankful in the hard times. Thankful when we have plenty. Thankful when we are struggling. Thankful for the Lord’s abiding and faithful presence in our lives.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 1-4

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