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April 1, 2025

Idols

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 4-8 (audio reading)

What comes to mind when you think of an idol? Perhaps you've visited archaeological sites and seen how the ancients worshiped? Perhaps you've walked through museums and seen the religious symbols of different cultures throughout history? Perhaps it's a golden statue from the Indiana Jones movies? Those kinds of idols are easy to spot. It's much harder to discern the idols of our own lives. Technology. Money. Possessions. Positions. Idolatry comes all too easy for us. John Calvin was right when he wrote that our hearts are idol factories. We produce them at a relentless pace, as if they were on an assembly line.

We're so prone to idolatry that we turn good things, even godly things, into ultimate things. Consider the nation of Israel. Under threat by their Philistine neighbors. Having been defeated once already in battle. Afraid of what might happen if they were defeated a second time. They called on their priests to bring them the ark of the Lord. Now we all know the ark of the Lord is sacred. It resided in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle. The very place where the high priest met with God. It was perhaps the most important religious symbol in all of Israel. But at the end of the day, it was just a box. It held no power of its own. Carrying it into battle did nothing for Israel. Even though it was a good thing, it was not an ultimate thing. Even though it was a sacred thing, a godly thing, it was just a symbol. It was no substitute for God Himself.

Israel made the mistake of placing their trust in a gift rather than the Giver. They believed the ark "contained" God and if they just carried it with them in battle, they could not be defeated. But the heavens cannot contain God's glory, much less this little box Israel carried around with them. And while it's tempting to look down on Israel's foolishness, how often do we make the same mistake? How often do we try to put God in box? How often do we try to control Him? Manipulate Him? Judge Him? Evaluate Him? Remake Him in our own image? I think of the number of people who've said to me over the years, "I could never believe in a God like that...(insert whatever quality you take issue with)" I think about the number of times I have said or thought something similar. But God is not bound to our ideas of Him. He is not bound to our understanding of Him. And every time we try to reduce Him down to size, we are engaged in idolatry. Every time we try to capture Him with our theological systems, we are in danger of misrepresenting Him. Placing our trust once again in ourselves rather than in God.

Towards the end of our reading for today, Samuel calls Israel to return to the Lord. He challenges them to put away all their false gods. He challenges them to worship God alone and not place their trust in idols, even if they are sacred objects. "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, get rid of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths that are among you, set your hearts on the Lord, and worship only him. Then he will rescue you from the Philistines." So the Israelites removed the Baals and the Ashtoreths and only worshiped the Lord." (1 Samuel 7:3-4 CSB) This same challenge remains for us today. To set our hearts on the Lord and worship Him alone.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 9-12

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April 2, 2025
Disappointment

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 9-12 (audio reading)

Disappointment is hard to navigate. I recently was talking to a friend who experienced a painful disappointment in their life. People with whom they were close let them down. People they trusted and invited into their home had betrayed them. People they loved had walked away. I've seen it too many times to count. I've seen it in marriages and families. I've seen it in churches and small groups. I've seen it in business and friendship. And the natural response is to pull back. Protect our hearts. Refuse to trust anyone ever again lest we open ourselves up to more hurt. Even if the person or parties return, we too often refuse to forgive. Refuse to extend grace. And the result is only more brokenness and heartbreak and pain.

There is so much to admire about Samuel. His devotion to the Lord from a young age. His military prowess. His leadership ability. His spiritual authority and wisdom. His faithfulness over so many years. But perhaps what I admire most is his attitude at the end of his life. When the people he has given his life to turn on him and ask for a king. They reject his leadership in a desire to be just like the nations around them. It had to be a crushing disappointment for him. But what is his response? "As for me, I vow that I will not sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you. I will teach you the good and right way. Above all, fear the Lord and worship him faithfully with all your heart; consider the great things he has done for you. However, if you continue to do what is evil, both you and your king will be swept away." (1 Samuel 12:23-25 CSB) Samuel never stops praying. Never stops teaching. Never stops discipling. Never stops seeking to lead them by example. It doesn't matter that they have rejected and betrayed him. His calling doesn't depend on their affirmation. He trusts in the Lord alone.

What about you? What disappointments have you faced in your life that have tempted you to withdraw? Tempted you to avoid? Tempted you to withhold forgiveness and grace? What relationships in your life need healing and reconciliation? How can you be an agent of grace in the midst of conflict? How can you be a person of peace when those you love are at odds with one another? Follow Samuel's example. Never stop praying, even for those who hurt you. Never stop living the good and righteous way. Never stop fearing the Lord and worshipping Him faithfully with all your heart. Never forget the great things He has done for you and seek to do those same things for others.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 13-16

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April 3, 2025
Heart

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 13-16 (audio reading)

1 Samuel 16:7 is one of my favorite verses in all the Bible. “But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or his stature because I have rejected him. Humans do not see what the Lord sees, for humans see what is visible, but the Lord sees the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7 CSB) What does God see when He looks on your heart? Does He see a heart full of devotion or a heart that’s divided? Does He see a heart that is humble and willing and obedient or a heart that is prideful and resistant and oriented more around self? Does He see a heart full of love and grace or a heart full of anger and hate? Does He see a heart that is quick to forgive or quick to judge?

What does it mean to love God with a “whole” heart? To be fully devoted to Him? Does it mean outward, physical perfection? King Saul literally stood head and shoulders above his countrymen. (1 Sam. 10:23) Eliab, David’s older brother, clearly was an impressive physical specimen. (1 Sam. 16:6) Does it mean achievement or success? I am sure God could easily have lined up a hundred other men who had accomplished a heck of a lot more than David. Is it based on wealth or privilege? Or perhaps great moral character? What kind of heart does God treasure in a man or woman? The key is found in 1 Sam. 15:22-23 CSB, “Does the Lord take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? Look: to obey is better than sacrifice, to pay attention is better than the fat of rams.” Humility. Submission. Obedience. These are the qualities on which God places supreme value.

King Saul was a half-hearted man. Though he was chosen by God and instructed by Samuel in the “rights and duties” of godly kingship, his heart was divided. At times, Saul was faithful and found great success. At other times, he was unfaithful and found only heartbreak. The unlawful sacrifice at Gilgal. A rash vow during the heat of battle. A refusal to devote the Amalekites to destruction. These events illustrate the half-hearted devotion Saul paid to God and it eventually cost him everything. The kingdom was literally ripped from his hands. The Spirit of the Lord departed from him. He ended up tormented and paranoid.

King David was a whole-hearted man. David was a man after God’s own heart though this didn’t make him perfect. In fact, his failures are massive and significant and costly. But through it all, the one thing David consistently does is seek after God. David keeps humbling himself before God. David keeps returning to God in repentance. And God loves David. Honors David. Promises to give the throne to his descendants for generations.

Take some time today and honestly examine your heart. Are you half-hearted or whole-hearted in your devotion to Jesus? We’ve already seen that it doesn’t necessarily depend on our outward appearance or achievement or actions. We can’t count on the image we project to the world to save us. We have to be strong and courageous enough to take the inward journey into the heart. What do you find there? What will God see when He looks at you?

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 17-20, Psalms 59

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April 4, 2025
Future

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 17-20, Psalms 59 (audio reading)

I hate uncertainty. I struggle with not knowing the future. I do all I can to predict and prepare for what's next. I don't like surprises. I don't like it when life takes an unexpected turn. These things make me feel insecure. At the same time, I believe in the sovereignty of God. I trust God holds my future in His capable hands. I believe God will use all things in my life for my good and for His glory. I just wish sometimes He would give me a glimpse of what's to come.

David had no idea what the future held for him. One day, he's tending sheep. The next, he's fighting a giant. One day, he's laboring in obscurity, a complete unknown. The next, he's famous for delivering Israel from the Philistines. One day, he's outdoors, in the fields, hunting for his food, living with smelly, dirty sheep. The next, he's in Jerusalem, living at the king's court, eating at the king's table, making a name for himself as he wins battle after battle. How did David get from here to there? It's actually pretty simple. "So David got up early in the morning, left the flock with someone to keep it, loaded up, and set out as Jesse had charged him." (1 Samuel 17:20 CSB) Nothing extraordinary. No voices from heaven. No miraculous signs. Just following his father's request to check on his brothers. This ordinary, mundane decision literally changes the course of his life as well as the future of Israel.

How many times can we look back on our lives and say the same? How many times did a simple, ordinary, mundane decision lead us to an opportunity that changed our lives? Can we see God's hand in it? Using the ordinary to accomplish the extraordinary? Using our everyday decisions to accomplish His will? I certainly can see this dynamic in play in my life. My choice of a college coming out of high school led me to an opportunity to accept Christ and meet my future wife. My choice of a church in Boulder led me to an opportunity to attend Princeton Seminary. My choice to serve a small church in Mobile, AL prepared me to lead the church I currently serve in Parker, CO. My choice to apply for a fellowship program at Columbia Seminary led me to an opportunity to be mentored by Steve Hayner. My connection to Steve gave me the opportunity to get my doctorate which has opened all kinds of doors professionally for me over the years. The list goes on and on. It's astounding to see and nothing I could ever have planned. Not in my wildest dreams.

Someone once famously said, "We may not know the future but we know the One who holds the future in His hands." We do have a sure and certain hope. Not because we know the future. Not because we can predict what's next with any degree of accuracy. Not because we are prepared for whatever may come. We have a sure and certain hope because we trust the Lord. We know He guides and directs our steps. We know He is faithful to be with us wherever we go. This is what set David apart from all the other warriors in the army of Israel. Though he didn't know what awaited him when he rode into camp that day, he knew the Lord was with him so he could face even a giant like Goliath without fear.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 21-24, Psalms 91

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April 5, 2025
Godly Confidence

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 21-24, Psalms 91 (audio reading)

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to speak to different groups of leaders within my denomination. Different churches in different communities than my own, sometimes from different cultures than my own. One thing they all hold in common is a deep love for God and a passion to seek Him for the future of their life together. Often, the way forward is not easy. It can be unclear. It can be full of challenges. There can be a lot of conflict to navigate. Major decisions and major risks have to be taken in order to move forward. Those first few steps of faith are the hardest to take, at least in my experience. I try to share vulnerably from my own life when I speak. I share the stories of the challenges I've had to face and my many failures along the way. I share the stories of the conflicts I've had to manage and the anxieties I've felt. I share the stories of the pivotal moments when major decisions had to be made and the incredible risks taken for the Kingdom of God and how those worked out. Like everyone, I have had my ups and downs. I've had my successes and failures. But through it all, I've learned to lean on God for my confidence.

Godly confidence is not something we are born with. It is something we earn over a lifetime. Primarily through hardship and struggle. It is forged in the fires of adversity. It is tempered in times of trial. It is refined through seasons of suffering. As I said, I've had my share. When my life was at its lowest possible point and I was in danger of losing everything and everyone I loved, God met me in a powerful way. He lifted me up out of the pit and set my feet on solid ground. I learned the truth of David's words from Psalm 91, "Because He holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him. I will protect him because he knows My name. When he calls to Me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him My salvation." David also had a godly confidence. It's what led him into the valley to meet Goliath. It's what won him victory after victory against the Philistines. It's what sustained him when he was falsely accused and hunted down by King Saul. David knew God was with him. He trusted God to lead and guide him. He took great risks and leveraged everything he had over and over again in service of the Lord. And he never lost sight of God's protection. He never took advantage of his position. Even when he had King Saul at his mercy, he refused to lay a hand on the Lord's anointed. He knew his time would come and it would be by God's hand not his that he would become king.

Once you hit rock bottom and find God waiting for you there, there isn't much that will shake you. Once you've been through the fires of adversity and God leads you to the other side, there isn't much that can break you. Once God takes your life down to the studs and begins building you back again, you find yourself no longer placing your trust in the things of this world. Success. Wealth. Power. Position. None of it matters except that it put to use to expand and grow the Kingdom of God. I've staked my life on this truth. I've watched God do His miraculous work through His people time and time again. I've been privileged to have a front row seat to the movement of the Holy Spirit as He transforms so many lives. I've experienced the sufficiency of the gospel over and over again in my own life despite my foolishness and failures. God is able, friends! God is MORE than able to do MORE than we can ever ask or imagine. Trust Him with your life today!

Readings for tomorrow: No devotionals for today

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April 7, 2025
Refuge

Readings for today: Psalms 7, 27, 31, 34, 52 (audio reading)

These words today hit different when you know David's story. On the run. Hiding in the hills. Living out of caves in the wilderness. Constantly under threat. Always having to watch his back. This is where life finds David right now and what does he do? He sings. He composes songs to God. He sets his prayers to music. He hits on themes that will resonate among God's people for centuries.

God is our refuge. We don't place our hope in strongholds for they can be taken. We don't place our hope in fortified cities for they can be overcome. We don't place our hope in foreign kings and princes for they can be bought off. We don't place our hope in our own strength or wisdom for we can falter and fall. God is our only sure refuge. He is the only one who can deliver us from those who pursue us, those who attack us, those seek to do evil to us. At the same time, to take refuge in the Lord is a fearful thing. It means we will be exposed, vulnerable, laid bare before Him. He will search our hearts to see if there is any wrong we have done. He will judge whether we have acted in righteousness towards those with whom we are at odds. David invites this judgment for he knows the Lord judges with righteousness. David has no fear for he has done nothing wrong. He has refused to take advantage of circumstances and situations to benefit himself. He is waiting on the Lord. He is confident God has good plans for him and will bring them to pass in His time.

Is God your refuge? Is God the one you run to when you are afraid? When feel under attack? When life is hard? When the future is uncertain? When you are experiencing conflict with those you love or those you serve? How does one make God a refuge? One follows the example of David. First and foremost, you pray. You pray honestly and openly. You pray not for your will but for the Lord's will to be done in your life. You invite the Lord to scrutinize your life and judge the intentions of your heart. You draw close to the Lord. Wait on the Lord. Sit in silence and solitude before Him. No distractions. No alarms. No rush. You might even journal. Write down what's on your heart. Perhaps even sing your prayers if you're so inclined. Second, you trust. You believe. You cling to hope. Like David, you have faith the Lord hears the cries of the righteous and delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is near the brokenhearted and crushed in spirit. You may be facing many afflictions but the Lord's promise is to deliver you from them all. Finally, you act. You act righteously and justly. You act graciously and mercifully. You act lovingly and compassionately. You humble yourself under God's mighty hand and surrender your will and your way to Him. Walking with the Lord is what gives the godly their confidence.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 56, 120, 140, 141, 142

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April 8, 2025
Deliverance

Readings for today: Psalms 56, 120, 140, 141, 142 (audio reading)

The Psalms are known as “the prayer book of the Bible” and for good reason. They are the literal prayers of the people of Israel. People like David and Solomon and Asaph. They teach us how to pray when times are hard and tough. They teach us how to pray when we are anxious and afraid. They teach us how to pray when we are poor and powerless. They teach us how to pray when times are good. When victory is within our grasp. When life has taken an upward turn. Most of all, they direct us to God. They teach us how to cry out to God in times of need and how to praise God in times of blessing.

In this particular season of his life, David is on the run. He has yet to assume his rightful place on the throne. He’s even had to leave Israel and take refuge among the Philistines who are his mortal enemies. Think about that for a minute. David literally has made his name defeating Goliath and the Philistine armies over and over again but now it is safer for him to live among them than his own people! No wonder David cries out to God. You have probably noted that many of the Psalms provide a brief description at the beginning before the actual verses begin. It gives a bit of the context for that particular prayer. Two of today’s Psalms were written when David was held captive by the Philistines or hiding out in a cave. The others suggest he was also facing adversity, perhaps around the same time. The themes of these Psalms focus on protection, deliverance, and rescue from his enemies. Each of the Psalms is also a declaration of trust. A profession of faith. David prays in confidence, believing the Lord will hear and answer his prayers.

The Psalms invite us to pray similar prayers. They invite us to express similar emotions. They give us permission to come before the Lord authentically and honestly, without fear of judgment. At the same time, the Psalms challenge us to believe. They challenge us to trust God. They challenge us to walk with open hands before Him and be willing to submit our will to His own. Deliverance may come from an unexpected place. Rescue may come when we least expect it. God does protect us but not always in the way we would think or according to our timing. We have to be willing to let God be in charge. This is what sets David apart. His prayers declare His trust in the almighty, sovereign power and plan of God.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 25-27, Psalms 17, 73

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April 9, 2025
Humility

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 25-27, Psalms 17, 73 (audio reading)

I am convinced humility is a super-power. I believe it was former President Harry Truman who once said, “It’s amazing what you can accomplish if you don’t care who gets the credit.” I believe him. It’s certainly squares with my experience. When I have been willing to lay aside pride and ego, the impact of whatever is accomplished grows exponentially. When I have been willing to relinquish my rights for the sake of others, especially those in less powerful positions, all kinds of new opportunities emerge. When I have been willing to let go of control and work collaboratively and share authority and extend freedom, we reach heights I’ve never dreamed possible.

Imagine what could have happened if Nabal had welcomed David’s servants? Imagine instead of cursing David and acting a fool, if he blessed David and thanked him for the many ways he protected his shepherds in the wilderness? Imagine if Nabal had not looked down on David, calling him a slave, but instead treated him honorably and welcomed him to his feast? Tragically, Nabal hardened his heart and fell under God’s judgment. Abigail, on the other hand, is the perfect picture of humility. When she hears what her husband had done, she rushes out to make up for it. She intercedes for his life and is able to avert a war. She shows us what grace looks like in action and David is so impressed, he takes her for his wife after Nabal dies. One even wonders if Abigail’s example rubs off on David? In the very next chapter, David has the opportunity to kill Saul and bring an end to the civil war in Israel, he stays his hand. He refuses to take Saul’s life, trusting God to make it happen in His perfect time. In this way, David will know it is the Lord who fights his battles and gives him the victory. As Abigail says so well, “And when the Lord has done to my lord according to all the good that He has spoken concerning you and has appointed you prince over Israel, my lord shall have no cause of grief or pangs of conscience for having shed blood without cause or for my lord working salvation himself.” (1 Samuel 25:30-31 CSB)

In my experience, you can choose to live life in one of two directions. Either you will say to God, “Thy will be done” or God will say to you, “thy will be done.” You will either humble yourself before the Lord and live generously and open-handedly or you will harden your heart and live pridefully and selfishly. There really is no middle ground. Those who choose the latter path find themselves on the same trajectory as Nabal or Saul. Their hearts eventually turn to stone and they die with no one to mourn their passing. Those who choose the former path find themselves on the same trajectory as Abigail. Their lives are rich and full and when they pass, many come to mourn them. Which path do you find yourself on today?

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 35, 54, 63, 18

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April 10, 2025
Victory from Defeat

Readings for today: Psalms 35, 54, 63, 18 (audio reading)

At fifty-two years old, I can look back over the course of my life and think of several times where my future teetered on the edge of a knife. If not for the intervention of the Lord, I would have fallen. I would have failed. I would have lost everything. I remember being in high school and our family being on the verge of homelessness. We were down to our final month before foreclosure and eviction. We had no money left. The house needed to sell and God came through at the 11th hour. I remember being in college and not doing well. I was in the process of flunking out. I was drinking heavily. I could easily have dropped out and become an alcoholic but God intervened. Literally saved my life. Plucked me out of the pit and set my feet on the rock. I remember losing our first child at 22 weeks. The divorce rate for couples who lose children is extremely high and we could easily have become another statistic but God drew us close to Himself and our marriage only got stronger. I can think of several critical moments in the different churches and ministries I've been part of over the years which could easily have gone south. Moments of significant conflict. Moments where I was personally attacked. Moments where I felt betrayed. If not for God, my ministry career would have looked a lot different but He preserved me through each and every trial. He made me stronger and more resilient and most of all, more dependent on Him.

David has experienced a lot in his life at this point. He's been on top of the mountain like when he defeated Goliath and he's been in the lowest of valleys like when he's being chased by Saul. He's experienced a lot of victory in his life and he's been on the run from his enemies. He's had moments when he could have taken matters into his own hands and claimed the throne of Israel by killing Saul. He's had other moments where Saul almost captures him to put him to death. Through it all, David continues to look to the Lord. He continues to give God all the credit for his life and his success and his deliverance. "I will give thanks to your name, O Lord, for it is good. For He has delivered me from every trouble, and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies." (Psalms 54:6-7 CSB) He refuses to let those who attack him get him down. He refuses to give into despair when he is betrayed or falsely accused. He knows the Lord sees his heart and he trusts God to vindicate him in the end. "Vindicate me, O Lord, my God, according to your righteousness, and let them not rejoice over me." (Psalms 35:24 CSB) Most of all, David continues to seek God with all his heart. He never wavers in his faith. "I love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold." (Psalms 18:1-2 CSB)

How do you respond to adversity? How do you respond when you feel attacked or betrayed or falsely accused? How do you respond when things don't go your way or take a turn for the worse? Do you look to the Lord when you find yourself wandering in the wilderness? In a dry and thirsty land? What about when things are good? Do you give God the praise? Do you give God the credit for the good things in your life? For His intervention and His provision and His blessing? When you look back over the course of your life, can you see where the Lord has brought victory in your life? Perhaps even from the jaws of defeat?

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 28-31, 1 Chronicles 10

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April 11, 2025

Fear

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 28-31, 1 Chronicles 10 (audio reading)

Fear does funny things to people. It closes doors that otherwise remain open. It limits options unnecessarily. It puts blinders on our eyes and gives us tunnel vision so we see the worst case scenarios. A few months ago, I was talking to my daughter about her college choices. I encouraged her to apply to several different colleges so we could have as many options as possible. She received it as a lack of support for the one college she wanted to go to. Her fear caused her to think the worst of me rather than the best. After we talked it out, she understood and more doors have opened for her. A friend of mine is trying to kick an addiction. The biggest challenge he faces is how to manage his anxiety and fear. He's gotten so used to numbing himself on marijuana that he doesn't know how he'll be able to cope. We've talked about a lot of healthier options like exercise, taking a walk outside, hanging out with friends, etc. but he can't seem to take the blinders off. It's making an already difficult situation even more challenging. I think about what's happening in the stock market over the last week or so. Fear and anxiety and uncertainty are creating all kinds of volatility. People are responding to worst case scenarios rather than remaining calm and looking at all their options.

Saul too experienced fear. Fear is what drove him to seek out the help of a medium. Fear is what drove him to try to call up the dead. Fear is what drove him to abandon God and try to find a way out of the mess he'd made on his own. However, the more he tried, the worse things got. All because of fear. Fear is what drove the Philistine leaders to kick David out of their army. Their fear of what he might do, given the right opportunity, cost them a valuable ally. Fear is what drove Saul to take his own life. He was afraid of what might happen to him should he be captured. He was afraid of the torture and the shame. But when his armor-bearer refused to take his life, he fell on his own sword. Fear is what caused Israel to run from battle. After the death of Saul and his sons, Israel lost the will to fight and fled to the countryside.

What is the antidote to fear? It's not courage. Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage doesn't prevent you from being afraid. Courage is working through the fear to do what needs to be done. Courage is moving forward despite the fear. Courage is facing your fears and not letting them limit you in any way. Courage is important but it's not the antidote to fear. Faith is the only thing that can protect us from fear. Faith in God. Faith in those we love. Faith gives us the ability to believe God is more than able to do all we ask for or imagine. Faith is the confidence that God will deliver on His promises. Faith is assurance of things hoped for and the evidence of things unseen. When we walk by faith, we don't need to walk by sight. When we live by faith, we won't place our trust in the temporary things of this world. Faith gives us the eyes to see beyond the horizon of this world to the world to come. It opens our eyes to all the options that lie before us, including the ones that only God can see right now. As powerful as motivator as fear can be, faith is even more powerful.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 121, 123-125, 128-130

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April 12, 2025
Intimacy with God

Readings for today: Psalms 121, 123-125, 128-130 (audio reading)

Most people I talk to experience a significant, if not insurmountable, gap between themselves and God. They believe God is distant. Far away. Looking down from heaven “up there” somewhere. When I probe a little, I usually find it’s because they also experience a significant, perhaps equally insurmountable, gap between the people they are and the people they believe God has created and called them to be. They read passages like “be holy as I am holy” and immediately assume it is impossible. They read the stories of the faith of people like Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Joshua, Deborah, etc. and immediately assume “that could never be me.” They believe they have to reach a certain level - always left undefined - of “goodness” in their life to be accepted by God. But the lack of definition always keeps them guessing and the doubt gnaws at their soul. They read the Psalms and they marvel at the intimacy displayed by David and the other writers. They can’t fathom what that might feel like or look like in their lives.

What if I told you that the gap between us and God was a myth? What if I further told you that the gap between the person you are and the person God created you to be was a lie? What if, by God’s grace, He has already closed the gap that once existed between us? What if what we’re feeling is echoes of a time and a reality that no longer exists? This is what the ancients understood. Our forefathers and foremothers in the faith truly believed God when He said, “I have become your God and you have become my people.” They believed God closed the gap between heaven and earth to come to dwell with them. First in a Tabernacle. Later in a Temple. Furthermore, what if, by God’s grace, the gap we all feel between the person we are and the person God has called us to be is a lie? What if, by God’s grace, we already are who God created us to be and are simply learning to live it out? Yes, we will make mistakes. Yes, we will sin and fall short. But what if, by God’s grace, the gap has been closed by the death of Jesus Christ on a cross? What if we already are righteous in God’s sight and are just learning to live in light of this new reality?

I think one of the devil’s greatest schemes is to get us to believe in a “gap.” And not just any gap but a chasm that is insurmountable, unbridgeable, uncrossable, inaccessible. And this makes God seem so distant and unreachable which makes intimacy with Him impossible. But this is not true! This is a lie! There is no gap between us and God. Not anymore. Not with the Word becoming flesh and making His dwelling place among us. Not with the Holy Spirit coming to take up residence in our hearts when we come to saving faith. There is no gap because God has closed the gap. God bridged the gap. God crossed the divide. God tore down the dividing wall that separated us from Him. And we are now set free to live as children of light. Children of joy. Children of love and mercy and blessing. Saved by grace, we get to live by grace. Saved by unconditional love, we get to extend that love out to others. Saved by God’s unending mercy, we get to be merciful ourselves to those around us. This is the beauty and the glory of the gospel. Will we do it perfectly? Of course not. But that’s not the point. God has not left it up to us to bridge the gap. God has not put the burden of creating intimacy with Him on our shoulders. He doesn’t expect us to make our way to Him. He comes to us. Just like He did to all those who came before us.

Readings for tomorrow: No devotionals on Sundays

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April 14, 2025
Wilderness

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

In my sermon yesterday, I said, “Humanity has always wandered in a moral and ethical wilderness.” Despite all the technological and medical and scientific advances, we have no idea of where we’re going or why or what we’d do when we get there. We are ethical and moral adolescents, constantly fighting against God’s created order. I think the root of the problem is that we want to be gods ourselves but that’s probably another post for another day. However, today’s reading felt very familiar to me. Probably because I see many of the same dynamics playing out in our world today. Humanity seems just as prone to violence, greed, power, selfishness, hatred, and anger as ever.

Today’s reading includes political intrigue, civil war, and assassinations. Israel was in chaos as different parties jockeyed for influence and power. An Amalekite lies about killing Saul in order to curry favor with David and ends up being executed. Abner tries to preserve Saul’s legacy by marshaling Israel on Ish-Bosheth’s behalf only to split with his master over a perceived offense. Joab and his brothers have it out for Abner, perhaps seeing him as a potential rival for position and power in the new kingdom. The sons of Rimmon take matters into their own hands to bring about the end of the civil war and gain favor with David only to suffer the same result as the Amalekite who killed Saul. It’s a brutally honest account of the politics of the day and the only silver lining is that God is using even this sinful raw material to fashion His will for His people.

Our politics aren’t much different. The intrigue and jockeying for power and influence and position continues. The civil war between Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and progressives is as brutal and hateful as it has ever been. Thankfully, mass violence has yet to break out in our country but we certainly see it in different parts of the world. About a year ago, I was supposed to board a plane for Ethiopia. We were heading to a northern region of the country to a city called Dessie to train church planters but violent protests broke out as one particular tribe pushed back against the decisions of the national government. Two aid workers were killed. All US State Department personnel were evacuated from the area as fears of a resumption of hostilities in the area grew. It was so heartbreaking. And yet, it served as a great reminder that our only hope is the same God who was at work in ancient Israel bringing about His will through the sinful choices of human beings was still at work in our world today.

I love the line from Romans 8:28, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28 CSB) All things. The good. The bad. The ugliness of life. God uses it all according to His sovereign power and wisdom to bring about His will for you, for me, for the world in which we live. No matter what circumstances you find yourself in. No matter what choices you made that brought you to this place. No matter what forces you find arrayed against you. No matter what lies in your control or outside your control. Trust that God is taking the raw material of your life to make you more and more into the image of His Son and prepare you to spend eternity with Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 6, 9, 10, 14, 16, 21

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April 15, 2025
Humanity

Readings for today: Psalms 6, 9, 10, 14, 16, 21 (audio reading)

The good news of the gospel is that God became a human being. He took on human flesh. He took on human nature. He experienced everything you and I experience. He knows hunger and thirst. He knows hardship and poverty. He knows pain and suffering. He knows what it's like to feel tired and overwhelmed. He knows what it's like to be abandoned, betrayed, and denied. He has suffered injustice. He has been falsely accused and falsely tried and falsely convicted and falsely condemned. He knows what death feels like. He knows what it's like to be laid to rest in on a cold slab in a tomb.

I try to read the Psalms backwards. In fact, I try to read the entire Old Testament backwards. What do I mean by that? What I mean is I try to read it through the lens of Jesus Christ. With Jesus as my "hermeneutical key" - as my professors in seminary might have said - it all makes sense. A whole new world of meaning opens up. My understanding deepens. My connection to the people of the Old Testament becomes stronger. Take King David. Imagine all he must be experiencing as he expresses himself through prayer set to music. "Be gracious to me, Lord, for I am weak; heal me, Lord, for my bones are shaking; my whole being is shaken with terror. And you, Lord, how long?" (Psalms 6:2-3 CSB) Is he suffering from disease? Depression? Adverse life circumstances? Is he fearful of the future? Afraid of his enemies? Is he having a hard time being patient for God's will to come about? Or the flip side, what happened that caused David to write, "When my enemies retreat, they stumble and perish before you. For you have upheld my just cause; you are seated on your throne as a righteous judge. You have rebuked the nations: You have destroyed the wicked; you have erased their name forever and ever. The enemy has come to eternal ruin; you have uprooted the cities, and the very memory of them has perished." (Psalms 9:3-6 CSB) Had he just won another victory? Had he just put his enemies to flight? Is he referring here to the Philistines or to the people who were still following the house of Saul in Israel? Can he sense the fulfillment of God's promises are near? And as always, I love David's honesty and transparency... "Lord, why do you stand so far away? Why do you hide in times of trouble?" (Psalms 10:1 CSB) He's not afraid to cry out to God from the depths of his heart.

Throughout history, the people of God have returned over and over again to the Psalms to learn how to pray. They have used them as a guide for prayer. They have prayed these words back to God. Made them their own. Prayer can be difficult. It's challenging to move beyond the rote prayers we learned in our youth. It's challenging to be honest and real with God. Frequently it can feel like our words are inadequate. Self-centered. Foolish. Like they bounce off the ceiling back into our laps. So many Christians I know and love struggle with prayer. Often when they ask me how they should pray, I will point them to the Psalms. Not just to repeat the words but to reflect on them and make them their own. Reflect on the feelings and emotions. Reflect on the heart of what David is saying. Let his heart's cry resonate with your heart's cry and lead you to express your deepest thoughts to God. And most of all, remember God has felt every feeling you feel as well.

Our God is safe. He is a refuge. A stronghold. Our deliverer. We are the apple of His eye and He hides us in the shadow of His wings. He is our protector. Our comforter. Our friend. We can tell Him anything. The deepest desires of our hearts are not hidden from Him. Nor are the wounds. The hurts. The disappointments. The fears. The failures. God rejoices with us when we experience success. When the victories come in our lives. God weeps with us when struggle. When we grieve. God fights our battles for us. We may not always understand His ways. We may not always agree with His timing. His

answer can be “No” just as easily as it can be “Yes.” It can even be “Not Yet.” Through it all, God is God and we are not and prayer reminds us the best place to be is at His feet.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 1-2, Psalms 43-44

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April 16, 2025
Story

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 1-2, Psalms 43-44 (audio reading)

Many years ago, a friend of mine introduced me to the “Three Story” method of evangelism. It’s simple and natural and easy to use. Basically, you start by asking another person about their story. By showing genuine curiosity in who they are and how they got here and where they feel they are headed, you get to learn all about another human being. Another creature made in God’s own image. You get to hear all about their hopes and dreams and, depending on their level of vulnerability, their heartbreaks and pain. It’s incredible what people will tell you if you are willing to listen. After sharing their story, the most natural thing for them to do is ask you about your story. I don’t know about you but I can’t share my story without sharing about the day Jesus Christ saved me. He literally changed the course of my life. And this brings us into the final story...God’s story...which is the story all of us are wrapped up in on some level. I have to tell you I’ve probably had thousands of conversations about Jesus over the years. I’ve not had one negative reaction when I used this method to tell His story. It doesn’t mean everyone gave their life to Jesus. Far from it. But it does get people thinking in new ways about the story of their life and what role God may have to play in it.

I thought about this method when I read through the genealogies at the beginning of Chronicles. It’s easy to brush past all these names. They don’t mean much to us because we don’t feel any kind of connection to them. They are names of people and places we have never encountered which is why they feel so distant to us. Irrelevant to our lives. But what if we engaged the reading using the “Three Story” method I shared above? What if this is Israel telling us her story? Telling us how she got to where she is today? Telling us about all the important people and places in her life? What if instead of just reading through the chapters, we envisioned a person telling us all about their family tree and what it meant to them? Would that change how we received it? I think it would. Now imagine that same person asking us about our family tree. What would we share? Could we point to names and places where our family had been? Do we see all the different connections that brought us to where we are today? Now think about God’s story. Where’s His hand in all of this? Where do we see Him at work in the lives of those who are listed? What story is God working out in and through His people for the world?

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 49, 84, 85, 87

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April 17, 2025
Faith under Pressure

Readings for today: Psalms 49, 84, 85, 87 (audio reading)

“Better a day in your courts than a thousand anywhere else. I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God than live in the tents of wicked people.” (Psalms 84:10 CSB)

There is nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. No place we can go to be safe. The world is full of sin and corruption. Injustice and oppression come in all kinds of forms. Human beings pursue power and pleasure at all costs. We say in our hearts, “there is no God.” Each of us does what is right in our own eyes. All of us are like sheep who have gone astray. Recently, I had a conversation with a good friend. They are looking to relocate out of our state. They simply cannot fathom the depths to which we have fallen. We are a haven for abortion on demand. We are considering criminalizing any dissent against the transgender movement. We are overspending to the tune of billions and are looking to reform, or perhaps even take away, the main guardrail (TABOR) that restrains the state government. As our state continues to move further and further left politically, many people of faith (not just Christians) feel they are being forgotten, left behind, left out, and marginalized. And I understand those feelings. It’s why I can’t in good faith discourage my friend from leaving, especially as they look to raise their children in a safer place. At the same time, I am not sure there is a “safer” place. I’ve lived all over the United States and, in my experience, every place has it’s issues. Every place deals with injustice, corruption, unrighteousness, and oppression. Every place faces the same root challenge of sin.

Israel faced these same challenges. It’s why they looked beyond the horizons of this world to the Lord. They understood they would not find a refuge in this world. They would not find a sanctuary in this world. There was no safe place to run to from sin. Their only home was with God. He would be their protector. He would be their provider. No matter where they lived, He would be with them. “For the Lord God is a sun and shield. The Lord grants favor and honor; he does not withhold the good from those who live with integrity.” (Psalms 84:11 CSB) At the end of the day, Israel understood herself to be an “alien and stranger” in this world. A people just passing through. They did not cling to the things of this world but instead sought to live open-heartedly and open-handedly. They didn’t expect the ungodly people who surrounded them to act in godly ways. Instead, they sought to live as faithfully as they could. They trusted God to use them as light to pierce the darkness. The world may make our faith illegal. They may seek to harass and persecute us for what we believe. The world may make it difficult to live as Christians. But at the end of the day, the government can’t legislate what happens in the heart. They can’t govern what we think, do, or say. Yes, it may become more costly to be a Christian in the years ahead. My friends around the globe would say, “welcome to the club.” They would point us to Jesus, who was crucified for what He believed in and stood for and humbly call us to follow His example. As we look to Him, we will discover the truth that the Psalmist sings about, “Faithful love and truth will join together; righteousness and peace will embrace. Truth will spring up from the earth, and righteousness will look down from heaven. Also, the Lord will provide what is good, and our land will yield its crops. Righteousness will go before him to prepare the way for his steps.” (Psalms 85:10-13 CSB)

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 3-5

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April 18, 2025
Righteous Prayer

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 3-5 (audio reading)

Over twenty years ago, a best-selling book was published on the prayer offered by a rather obscure Old Testament figure named Jabez. He shows up in 1 Chronicles 4:9-10 but no specific mention is made of how he fits into the family tree of Judah. He is described as a man of honor who was birthed in pain by his mother and who prayed a prayer God answered. That's it. Two verses total. Not much to go on. Not much to draw any conclusions from and yet the book written about him became an instant best-seller, selling millions of copies, launching an entire cottage industry.

Why the popularity? I think it has to do with the fact that Jabez' prayer fits the prevailing self-centered, "health and wealth" theology of so many Americans, Christian or not. "Jabez was more honored than his brothers. His mother named him Jabez and said, "I gave birth to him in pain." Jabez called out to the God of Israel, "If only you would bless me, extend my border, let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm, so that I will not experience pain." And God granted his request." (1 Chronicles 4:9-10 CSB) Fundamentally, we believe we are worthy of God's blessing. Fundamentally, we believe we have earned the right to have our territory expanded. Fundamentally, we believe we should never experience evil or pain or suffering. Fundamentally, we believe life is about us and our comfort and the prayer of Jabez only reinforces this idea.

I was in seminary when the book came out and I remember church after church teaching on it. All kinds of miracles were attributed to this prayer. Entire congregations would commit to praying this prayer for thirty, sixty, or ninety days and then report back on the ways God answered their prayers. Preachers, even from evangelical and mainline church contexts, would preach entire sermon series on this prayer and encourage people to memorize it and pray it daily. It seemed utterly crazy to me. After all, this was a verse ripped completely out of its Old Testament context. It comes from a figure in the Old Testament we know almost nothing about. If we're going to memorize one prayer from the Bible and pray it fervently and daily, shouldn't it be the Lord's Prayer?

This highlights a danger for us as we read through the Scriptures. The Bible is not a magic book. It is not a book full of mantras that we can pray to get what we want. The Bible is not a self-help book meant to teach us how to have a better life. The Bible has one primary purpose and that is to reveal the character and nature of God. It tells the story of God's mission to reach His people with the gospel. As one rabbi famously put it, "The Bible is not the story of humanity's search for God but God's search for humanity." God is on a rescue mission to deliver us from the powers of sin and death and evil. His goals are far greater than material blessings or expanding our territory or giving us more influence in this world. He wants to save a people for Himself. He is growing His family through the conversion of women and men. He is building His Kingdom here on earth through His church made up of Jews and Gentiles together. This is His plan and this is what should be the focus of our prayers.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 6, Psalms 36, 39, 77, 78

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April 19, 2025
Singing

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 6, Psalms 36, 39, 77, 78 (audio reading)

Music has always been a part of the worship of God. We sing about the character and nature of God. We sing about God's mighty acts in human history. We sing about God's power over creation and over the creatures of the earth. We sing of our redemption. The song book of the people of God is the Psalms. They set their prayers to music. Music allows them to express the full range of emotion. I imagine some of the songs they sang were slow and reflective. Others were face-paced and joyful. Still others were confessional and melancholy. Still others were focused on praise. We don't necessarily know the style of music they played or the different instruments they used. In my experience, both in Israel and the Middle East, it probably varied based on what was available to them and the quality of the leader. But those things were secondary. What mattered most was their heart and how they expressed themselves to God.

In 1 Chronicles six, King David sets apart a certain group of people to be in charge of musical worship. They will lead God's people in song. They will lead God's people when they come before Him to make their sacrifices. They will lead God's people during the prescribed feasts and festivals. They were not only in charge of leading God's people but I imagine they were also charged to create new songs for them to sing. New songs to describe the wonder and glory of God. New ways to describe all He had done for Israel throughout her history. I have to believe it was an amazing job. To spend your life pondering and reflecting and creating music for the people of God to sing as they come to worship. It's why I admire those I serve alongside at my own church for the many ways they create and design and shape our worship services week over week. Introducing new music to go alongside the classic hymns from our past that we all love. Introducing new liturgical elements through prayer and testimony to draw us all closer to the Lord. It is a great privilege to work alongside such gifted and talented people.

Ultimately, however, the excellence of the music doesn't matter if our hearts aren't right before the Lord. If we harbor sin. If we hold onto bitterness or resentment. If we refuse to extend forgiveness and seek reconciliation with others in our community. If we enter into worship with pride, seeking only to serve ourselves. God wants our hearts. He wants us to approach Him with humility and open hands. An authentically contrite heart, He will never despise or reject. As we gather for worship this Easter weekend, my prayer for all of us is that we come open and expectant and ready to meet the Lord. My prayer is we come honestly and authentically before Him. My prayer is we come in humility as we approach the throne of grace to receive the help we need. Most of all, my prayer is we come with a desire to worship the Lord. To make worship about Him and not us. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! May the miracle of His resurrection bring us to our knees in awe and wonder yet again!

Readings for tomorrow: No devotionals on Sundays

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April 21, 2025

Easter

Readings for today: Psalms 81, 88, 92, 93 (audio reading)

Holy Week is always powerful for me. It drains me emotionally, spiritually, and physically and not just because there is more activity on the schedule than normal. Yes, there are multiple services and multiple rehearsals and multiple things to do to mark this sacred week. Our teams run hard to pull it all off. There are a lot of late nights. But I find the emotional and spiritual demands of this week far more taxing than the physical ones. Closely walking with Jesus through His final days and hours opens my heart up to all kinds of emotions, many of them expressed so well in Psalm 88 from our reading today. Crying out to God. Feeling the weight of my sin. The loneliness of my journey at times. The rejection I've experienced in my life. The despair, weakness, and isolation. I know what it's like to feel like darkness is my only friend. This is the experience of Holy Saturday and by the time I get there every year, I feel exhausted and spent.

Then comes Easter Sunday. A new day. Another day. An additional day. A bonus day. You see, Holy Saturday is not the end of Holy Week! Though Holy Saturday is the seventh day, the last day, the Sabbath day; the resurrection of Jesus Christ changes things. Changes how we mark time. Changes how we look at our calendars. By raising His Son from the dead, God moves us beyond the old Sabbath into the new Sabbath. An eternal Sabbath. A Sabbath not bound by hours or minutes or seconds. A Sabbath not bound by the cycles of evening and morning. A Sabbath not made for this world but for the world to come. A Sabbath not made for earth but for heaven. And without fail, as each Easter morning dawns, I find my strength renewed. I find my heart lifted. I find my joy restored. I lift my eyes above the hills to see from where my true help comes! My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth! As Psalm 93 puts it, "The Lord reigns! He is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed, enveloped in strength. The world is firmly established; it cannot be shaken. Your throne has been established from the beginning; you are from eternity." (Psalms 93:1-2 CSB) Yes, the floods have lifted up. The world has done all it can to rid itself of God. To throw off all restraint. But the Lord rides the waves like a chariot. His voice is lifted high above the tumult of the seas. He will not be subject to His creation. He will not be ignored by the creatures made in His own image. By dying and rising again, He has declared His Word to be completely reliable, trustworthy, and true.

For Christians, Easter Sunday is not just a day on a calendar. It is not just an occasion to celebrate. It is a lived reality. We are an Easter people, shaped and formed by the Easter experience. Once you've tasted the new life Easter has to offer, the eternal life Easter has to offer, there's no going back. And why would you want to? The old life is drab and boring by comparison. Nothing attractive about it all. Certainly not worth comparing to the glory that has now been revealed in us through the Risen Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 7-9

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April 22, 2025
Small Things

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 7-9 (audio reading)

Easter weekend is a big one for any pastor. This one was no different. I spent a great deal of time after all the services connecting with different people. Different ages. Different cultures. Different languages. Different life experiences. Many of them asked me a variation of the same question...what now? Where do we go from here? How do live the resurrection life that we celebrate on Easter Sunday? Honestly, it's not rocket science. It's the small decisions we make every single day. It's paying attention to the little details in life that matter. The words we say. The way we listen to those we live with and work with and interact with every single day. Keeping our priorities straight. God first. Others second. Ourselves third. It's watching how we spend our time and energy and resources and making sure they serve God's purposes.

The thing that always strikes me about this section of the Jewish Histories is how important the little details are to God. He designates some of his people to be doorkeepers. Think greeters on a Sunday morning or a life safety team member who keeps everyone safe. He designates others to care for the utensils used in worship. Think of a deacon team who prepares the communion elements, makes the coffee, or serves the donuts and then cleans up and takes out the trash afterwards. Think of the facilities team who cares for the property and keeps things in working order. Then there are the singers. The worship teams. The volunteers who dedicate so much of their time and energy to practicing the music we sing week over week. The worship leadership who plans and executes each service with such intentionality. The audio and production team who spends late nights getting everything set up and torn down for each service. None of these may seem like big things. In fact, I've often heard people dismiss them as unnecessary or even distractions to "true worship" whatever that means. But these things matter to God so they should matter to us. The people involved matter to God so they should matter to us. We should appreciate them and honor their calling just as David and Samuel did in their own time.

Before we get too far away from Easter, I would encourage you to find a way to reach out to those who served this past weekend. Thank them for helping with the parking, the greeting, and the kids ministry. Thank them for serving the food and the coffee and preparing the communion elements. Thank them for leading us from the platform in music or from the sound booth in production. Thank the life safety team and the facility team for all their hard work setting up and tearing down. Thank the prayer team and the elders and deacons and staff who gave so much of their time and energy. None of them do it for the recognition, of course, but I know they will appreciate it. Even more, I believe God loves it when we honor His people for serving Him.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 5:1-10, 1 Chronicles 11-12, Psalms 133

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April 23, 2025

Unity

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 5:1-10, 1 Chronicles 11-12, Psalms 133 (audio reading)

Psalms 133 is one of my favorite Psalms. Mainly because I have seen it in action. I have seen what happens when God's people truly serve Him with one heart and mind. I have witnessed the miracles that take place when God's people put aside their egos, their needs, their wants, their desires in favor of serving the Kingdom. I have watched God's Spirit move when God's people humble themselves. Deny themselves. Pursue forgiveness and reconciliation. Lay aside their need to be safe, both physically and emotionally, and chase after God. It is powerful. Life-changing. It transforms churches. Communities. Villages. Towns. Cities. Entire tribes, regions, and nations.

True biblical unity requires us to relinquish "self" in favor of others. It requires us to lose our individual identity in favor of the whole. It requires us to consider others more important than ourselves. It requires us to risk. Risk being hurt. Risk being wounded. Risk feeling rejected. It requires us to have courage. Courage to forgive. Courage to pursue reconciliation. No matter what the cost. No matter how many times we get burned. Like Jesus told Peter, we must be willing to forgive "seventy times seven." It requires honesty. Transparency. Self-reflection. We must constantly seek to take the log out of our own eyes before we look to take the speck out of someone else's eye.

True biblical unity requires the church to lay aside its need to compete. Extend its brand. Criticize other parts of the Body as if "we have no need of them." It requires leadership to get serious about working together. Working with and for one another. Willing to sacrifice our buildings, budgets, and attendance in order to expand God's Kingdom in the communities where we serve. It requires mutual submission and accountability. A willingness to step aside and relinquish our platforms when we fall into sin. It requires a radical commitment to love God and neighbor at the expense of our organizations and institutions. Self-denial and picking up our cross is not just a call to the individual Christian but to the church as a community as well!

True biblical unity requires a radical re-orientation of the heart. It requires laying aside our personal preferences for the sake of those around us. It requires laying aside our cultural preferences for the sake of those who may be different than us. It is incredibly difficult and challenging which is why it happens so infrequently in Scripture. Even the unity King David experiences as he builds his kingdom will soon give way to division as his own children betray him. We have to constantly be on guard because we are our own worst enemy. Our hearts naturally resist unity because it requires literal death to self. And we have such a strong instinct for self-preservation.

Ultimately, unity is not something we can achieve through our own strength. It's not about us being the same but coming together across our differences, even allowing those difference to enrich our life together. And this is why it is a work of the Holy Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit can bring the kind of deep, spiritual unity Psalms 133 talks about. And the first step towards unity is surrender. Surrender to the Holy Spirit and all He wants to do in our lives.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 5:11-25, 2 Samuel 6, 1 Chronicles 13-16

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April 24, 2025
Audience of One

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 5:11-25, 2 Samuel 6, 1 Chronicles 13-16 (audio reading)

Many years ago, a therapist challenged me with this question, “Who are you trying to impress?” I was a young pastor serving my first church. The church was struggling when I first arrived and I felt it was my job to “save” her. I worked long hours. I got involved in everything. We launched new programs. The schedule filled up. More people came. By all outward appearances, the work I was doing was bearing fruit. But I was burning out. I was trying to do too much. And I was motivated by my fear of failure rather than my faith in God. I was worried about what my colleagues would say about me. Worried about my reputation in the community. Worried that the people I loved and served might think less of me. Worried that my family might lose faith in me. I was so worried about what others thought and believed and it was driving me crazy. So I went to see a counselor. A therapist who specialized in treating pastors. He cracked open my head and heart and help me to see that I was performing for the wrong audience. My true audience was the Lord. He was the only one whose opinion I needed to worry about and He had already declared me justified. Already declared me righteous. Already set His great love on me. Not because of anything I had done but because of what Christ had done for me. It’s hard to describe the freedom I felt once I processed this gospel truth once again. It was transformative and has shaped my life and ministry ever since.

King David understood his true audience. It wasn’t his people. It wasn’t his enemies. It wasn’t even his wife. David performed for the Lord. David served at the Lord’s good pleasure. David became king not through his own effort or ability or achievements or accomplishments but through the grace of God. This was why he was more than willing to strip down and dance for the Lord. It was why he was more than humble himself and dishonor himself before all the people. He didn’t care. He only had eyes for God. His heart was completely devoted to God. And while he would make incredible mistakes in the future and even commit terrible crimes that would put his kingship in jeopardy, right now, in this moment, he was as free as a person could be. All because he understood his true audience was God.

Who do you work for? Who do you perform for? Who are you living your life for? Is it for the cheers and affirmation of those around you? Is it to gain status and favor and influence in our world? Is it to secure a good reputation with your family or the community? What drives you? What motivates you? Is it fear of failure? Fear of letting others down? Fear of not being recognized? What would it look like for you shift your focus and begin playing for an audience of One? What would it take for you to shift your heart-set and mindset and begin doing “everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through Him?” (Col. 3:17)

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 15, 23-25, 47

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April 25, 2025
Walking with Integrity

Readings for today: Psalms 15, 23-25, 47 (audio reading)

Recently, a friend of mine went through a job change. He was notified he would be let go because his company was “going in a different direction.” The news came out of the blue. All of his performance reviews had been exceptional. He hit every mark the company ever set for him and often exceeded them. None of that seemed to matter. The boss just wanted to make a change. As you can imagine, he went through a range of emotions. There was the initial shock when he first got the news. Shock gave way to anger as he wrestled with the injustice of it all. Anger turned to frustration as he processed the years he had given to this company. Frustration became hurt as he realized how deeply this decision wounded him. In the midst of his hurt, he felt fear and anxiety rise up as he pondered what he would do next. Starting a job search at his age and station in life was no easy task. Would he be able to replace his income? Would he be able to provide for his family? He was pretty close to retirement so how many years did he really have left? I imagine many of us have gone through these experiences ourselves or walked through them with those we love. It’s not easy.

The temptation, of course, is to retaliate. To get back at those who’ve hurt us. To justify our anger and frustration and lash out. We might work to undermine. We might spread rumors or gossip about those in positions above us. We might seek to recruit others to our cause and create all kinds of conflict in the office on our way out. Sow seeds of discontent. Exploit opportunities to create dissension. Those kinds of things. Some might even take things to an extreme and try to take the company or the person responsible down with them. It can get ugly.

“What would God have me do?” This is the question my friend asked me. I took him to some of the Psalms we read today. I pointed him beyond his circumstances and challenged him to think about the bigger picture. Do you want the blessing of God on your life? Do you want the favor of God to go before you? Do you want to walk before God with a clean conscience and a pure heart? Then walk as blamelessly as possible. Do what is right. Don’t give in to the temptation to slander or return evil for evil. Remain humble. Stay focused on Jesus. Trust God is sovereign over all things - including injustice - and nothing can stand in the way of His will for your life.

The ultimate test of faith is what happens when we come face to face with a circumstance that is unjust or unfair. In those moments, we are faced with a choice to either “walk our talk” or go our own way. If we can keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. If we can keep our minds set on eternal rewards. If our treasures are truly in heaven, we will find ourselves looking to please God rather than man and this is the essence of godly integrity.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 89, 96, 100, 101, 107

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April 26, 2025
Filling a Need

Readings for today: Psalms 89, 96, 100, 101, 107 (audio reading)

I love the Psalms. They give expression to so much of what I feel on a day to day basis. They give me the words to pray as I navigate the ups and downs of life. Last week was one of the best weeks of my life. I've been a pastor for over twenty years but Holy Week hit different for me this year. Perhaps it was the intentionality and brilliance of our team as they planned and executed some of the most incredible worship services. Perhaps it was the overwhelming success of an Indian outreach event that's been in the works for some time now. Perhaps it was seeing all the people I know and love at PEPC coming to worship on a beautiful Easter morning. Perhaps it was all of the above. And it's why I found myself reciting the opening line of Psalms 89 on Sunday afternoon when everything was over. "I will sing about the Lord's faithful love forever; I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations with my mouth." (Psalms 89:1 CSB)

Of course, another possibility is the state of my soul this year. It's been a very good year but a very challenging one with lots of changes. My wife and I put our youngest daughters on a plane to Australia in late January/February and officially entered the "empty nest" phase of life. While we've enjoyed the transition and are proud of all four of our children, it has resulted in a significantly different rhythm for us. My dad passed away last year and my mom is needing more and more of my attention which I am more than happy to give. She is one of the most amazing people I know but getting older is not easy. The demands on my time are growing. I have been leading a national team for our denomination to revise standards for ordination and our recommendations were due April 15. I am heading to Ethiopia in May and my teaching outlines were due April 18. I am teaching a class at Denver Seminary and papers needed to be graded the first week of April. I am the chair of the board for a mission agency and we are writing two key policies that were due April 29. Not to mention preaching Palm Sunday and Easter for PEPC and our Indian Outreach Ministry. So lots going on! Ha! I love every bit of it. I feel called to every part of it. But I have been stretched during this season more than normal. Perhaps running on fumes also opens me up to the message of the Psalms in new and fresh ways and I found myself turning to Psalms 107 and finding comfort in these words, "Let them give thanks to the Lord for his faithful love and his wondrous works for all humanity. For he has satisfied the thirsty and filled the hungry with good things." (Psalms 107:8-9 CSB)

What about you? Do you find yourself full or empty or somewhere in between? Do you find yourself stretched, stressed, or relaxed? Are you joining the Psalmist in praise or looking to him for hope? What do you need from the Lord during this season? Let the words of the Psalms meet you in your point of need and direct your attention back to the Lord.

Readings for tomorrow: No devotionals on Sundays

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April 28, 2025
The Builder

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 17, Psalms 1, 2, 33, 127, 132 (audio reading)

“Unless the Lord builds a house, its builders labor over it in vain; unless the Lord watches over a city, the watchman stays alert in vain.” (Psalms 127:1 CSB) This verse hits me almost every year. Especially when juxtaposed with David’s desire to build the Lord a temple. A permanent home. A sacred place where Israel could come and go before the Lord. It’s not a bad desire. It’s not a sinful desire. In fact, the prophet Nathan initially affirms David’s heart. God Himself agrees with David though David will not be the one to build God His home. However, the bigger lesson God wants us to grasp here is that He is the master builder. He is the great architect of our lives. We may think we are builders, doers, planners, achievers but it is God who wills and who works according to His good pleasure.

It’s so tempting to look at the work of our hands and take credit. It’s so tempting to look at what we have done or what we have accomplished in our lives or what we have achieved and think we are the author of our success. But God makes it clear through the life of David that He is the one who builds and grows and grants success. God plucked David from obscurity in a shepherd’s field. Gave Him a name. Gave Him victory after victory. Anointed Him king. Built his household so he would have successors who will sit on the throne after him. David doesn’t bless God, God blesses David. David doesn’t provide for God, God provides for David. It’s not David who is making God’s name great, it is God who is making David’s name great. And the same dynamic is true for us. I think about my marriage and my family. We are close. We love each other deeply. We serve each other. We have great relationships and conversations and the future is so bright for all our kids. All of it is because of God. I think about the church God called me to serve. It is growing. It is thriving. There is so much life and joy here. All of it because of God. I think about the many ways I’ve been able to serve students at Denver Seminary or our denomination nationally or the Petros Network internationally. All of it because of God.

The problem, of course, is I start to think it’s because of me. I start to pat myself on the back. I start to believe my own hype. I start to look at everything and think “I did this” or “I’m the essential part of this story.” Nothing could be further from the truth. God doesn’t need me but graciously chooses to use me. God doesn’t depend on me but graciously invites me in to share in His blessings. God can easily do all this without me but graciously includes me. This is the lesson David needed to learn. It’s the lesson I need to still learn. It’s the lesson all of us need to learn and hold onto in life.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 8-9, 1 Chronicles 18

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April 29, 2025
Dedication

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 8-9, 1 Chronicles 18 (audio reading)

What often gets lost in the stories of David's victories is what he did with the spoils. The tribute from the Arameans. The gold shields from Hadadezer. The bronze captured from different cities. The gifts from the king of Hamath. He dedicates all of it to the Lord along with all the gold and silver captured from the nations he subdued. It's a powerful testimony to David's faith and humility. David understood his victories came from the Lord. He understood it was the Lord who had gone before him and won the battles. David gave the Lord all the honor and glory for his success. He walked humbly before the Lord never claiming any honor for himself. And the result? "The Lord made David victorious wherever he went." (2 Samuel 8:14 CSB) Not only that but the Lord established David's reign over all Israel and he ruled with righteousness and justice.

I think about the "victories" I've won in my own life. The successes I've had in ministry. The achievements I've been able to accomplish. Do I give the credit to the Lord or do I take some of the credit for myself? What do I do with all the blessings that come my way? Do I seek to bless others in the name of the Lord? Do I give all the honor and glory to God? Do I dedicate my time and energy and attention and resources back to the Lord in tangible ways? Give more generously? Serve more sacrificially? Am I committed to walking in faith and humility? One of the secrets I have learned over the course of my life and ministry is to always give God the credit. Remind myself I am nothing without Him. Everything I have and everything I've achieved over the course of my life is due to Him. He determined where I would be born and what family I would be born into and I have been blessed. He gave me the gifts and talents and abilities I enjoy. He created all kinds of opportunities for me that I did not deserve. He opened doors that should have remained shut. He called me to the church I serve. He raised me into positions of influence. All I did was walk with open hands. And that's why all the credit goes to God for any success I've had over the course of my life and ministry. And it's why I continue to dedicate more and more of my time, energy, and resources to His mission.

What about you? Do you see God's hand at work in similar ways in your own life? Do you give God the credit He deserves for the success you've been able to achieve? Do you look for tangible ways to dedicate your time, energy, and resources to Him? What would that look like for you today? Where do you start? What's the next step? Go to the Lord in prayer and ask the Spirit to lead you.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 10, 1 Chronicles 19, Psalms 20, 53, 60, 75

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April 30, 2025
Honor and Shame

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 10, 1 Chronicles 19, Psalms 20, 53, 60, 75 (audio reading)

One of the big challenges in reading the Bible, especially the Old Testament histories, is the cultural gap between their world and our world today. The ancient world viewed all of life through the lens of honor and shame. The goal in life was to accrue as much honor as possible and one would do this by honoring those around them and protecting the honor of those in their family, clan, tribe, and community. When the king of the Ammonites dies, David seeks to honor his son by sending emissaries to console and bless the family. The goal here was to strengthen the relationships between their two nations. However, Hanun shames David's messengers by cutting off their beards and exposing their nakedness and sending them away. It was a dramatic act of humiliation meant to humiliate David and Israel as much as the emissaries themselves. David responds by protecting the honor of the men. He tells them to remain in Jericho until their beards grow back so no one will see their shame. However, the shame cannot go unaddressed. The Ammonites know their actions are effectively an act of war. They know David will have to respond or the other nations who are watching will take advantage of his shame. So they form an army and attack Israel, hoping to catch David before he is prepared. David devises a strategy that not only defeats the Ammonites but also their allies, the Arameans. His victory is so complete the two tribes are afraid to ever join forces against Israel ever again.

Our culture is built on a guilt/innocence paradigm rather than honor/shame. A significant reason for this difference is how we understand ourselves. We see ourselves as individuals first and members of a community second. The opposite was true in the ancient world. We also privilege being "right" over being in "relationship" whereas those in the ancient world always privilege the relationship over everything else. We go to war if we feel it is the "right" thing to do and that's why we tend to describe our conflicts as a battle between "good and evil." In the ancient world, wars were fought over insults and perceived slights to members of a family or clan or tribe. Another layer to this dynamic is how the ancient writers described their victories. Hyperbole was a tool they often employed in order to increase the "honor" of their nation. So when the Bible describes these battles where tens of thousands are killed, it is highly unlikely it is using a literal number. The intent of the author is to convey a sense of overwhelming victory over their enemies. This is yet another significant cultural difference. Whereas we are concerned with getting the facts right and want a specific tally of the number killed, the ancient authors were more concerned with upholding the honor of their king and their nation as they reported out.

Interestingly enough, most of the world still runs on an honor/shame paradigm. When I travel to different nations in Africa or Asia or Central and South America or when I interact with immigrants domestically from these countries, I am always struck by how important honor is to building strong, healthy partnerships. Understanding this dynamic is the key to cross-cultural relationships and is becoming more and more important as the world gets smaller and our communities become more diverse.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 65, 66, 67, 69, 70

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