

BIBLE IN A YEAR

BIBLE, FOLLOWING JESUS, DISCIPLESHIP

2019

STUDY AND COMMENTARY

BY

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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NOVEMBER

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November 1, 2019

CALLING

Readings for today: Ezekiel 1:1-3:15, Hebrews 3, Psalms 104:1-23, Proverbs 26:24-26

I remember when I was first called into gospel ministry. It happened almost at the same time I was converted from death to life. I was a student at the University of Colorado in Boulder. I had recently become a Christian and I couldn't stop telling others about Jesus. It felt like an internal pressure I couldn't resist. A burning passion in my heart to share the good news. I wanted everyone to know about this Jesus who had changed my life forever. I led Bible studies. Engaged in apologetic debates with classmates and friends. I served in leadership in my campus ministry. Someone along the way asked me if I had ever thought about being a pastor. From that moment on, I couldn't imagine doing anything else.

The years have not been easy. Pastors literally battle principalities and powers and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm on a daily basis. We walk with people through the most difficult times in their lives. Addiction. Abuse. Depression. Suicidal ideation. Physical and emotional trauma. We are on call twenty four hours a day and seven days a week because tragedy never takes a day off. Along the way, we preach sermons, lead ministries, disciple believers, and try to find ways to shepherd a community of people towards the Kingdom. Those we love and serve struggle with sin. They often fight the will of God. Far too many abandon the faith altogether and we feel every loss viscerally. Perhaps that's why pastoral ministry is considered to be hazardous to one's health!

Ezekiel understood the challenge. He knew the call was not to fortune and fame. He would not be a social media influencer or attract thousands with his preaching. Instead, he would struggle and battle and fight for the soul of his people. It would be hard and he would grow tired and be tempted to throw in the towel. Listen to how God describes it, "Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you." And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me. And he said to me, "Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God.' And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them. And you, son of man, be not afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions. Be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. And you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house." (Ezekiel 2:1-7) Whew. You mean I won't lead a megachurch? You mean my "brand" will suffer? You mean I won't be comfortable and well-esteemed and make a good living? No indeed. Quite the opposite. In order for Ezekiel to fulfill his calling, God is going to have strengthen him. "Because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart. Behold, I have made your face as hard as their faces, and your forehead as hard as their foreheads. Like emery harder than flint have I made your forehead. Fear them not, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house." (Ezekiel 3:7-9) Notice there's not talk of balance here. No talk of self-care. No talk of Ezekiel's well-being. This isn't about him. It's about the call of God on his life and the sacrifice God is asking him to make.

Far too many of my friends and colleagues in ministry struggle with their calling. I don't want to diminish their pain in any way. The suffering is real. Trust me, I know. However, I do find too many hold to unrealistic expectations. They make false assumptions that answering God's call will not cost them personally or professionally. They make the mistake of thinking it shouldn't impact their family

life. They believe ministry can be accomplished in a forty hour work week and the church (or perhaps even God) has no right to demand more. They have a hard time with criticism. They almost can't believe it when people leave their church. They seem shocked when sinners show their true colors. I get it. I feel the frustration myself. But then I go to God's Word. I read about the calling God places on people like Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Deborah, David, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Elizabeth, Mary, Peter, and Paul. I pay particular attention to the calling our Father placed on His Son. And I realize my expectations are themselves sinful and self-centered. My life is not my own. I was bought at a price and God has every right to use me as He so chooses. My job is simply to trust Him come what may.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 3:16-6:14, Hebrews 4, Psalms 104:24-35, Proverbs 26:27

November 2, 2019
PREACHING

Readings for today: Ezekiel 3:16-6:14, Hebrews 4, Psalms 104:24-35, Proverbs 26:27

“Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. Because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds that he has done shall not be remembered, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning, and you will have delivered your soul.” (Ezekiel 3:17-21)

Preaching is not for the faint of heart. No matter what technique one may use, it ultimately comes down to communicating God’s message to God’s people with faithfulness. Preaching is not self-help. Preaching is not moral therapeutic deism. Preaching is not a TED talk. Preaching is not simply positive and encouraging. As preachers, we cannot escape the call to talk about sin. We cannot escape the call to talk about grace. We cannot preach the Law without the Gospel. We cannot preach salvation without talking about what people are being saved from.

Ezekiel clearly understands his role. He is not to speak his own words. He is not to offer his own ideas. He is not simply helping his people live their best life now. God has made him a watchman. When he sees danger on the horizon, he must sound the warning. When God’s people engage in sin, he must call them out. When the wicked come against him, Ezekiel must not fail. He must confront the wicked with God’s truth and let the chips fall where they may. If Ezekiel preaches faithfully, God will deliver him. But if Ezekiel falls down on the job, he will bear the blood guilt of his people.

It’s a sobering task to be sure. To think about the fact that every time I get up in the pulpit, I have a responsibility to preach God’s Word faithfully no matter how it may be received. And I know myself too well. I am too weak to do this on my own. Left to my own strength, I will run from the confrontation. I will make excuses. I will avoid the hard texts. I will try my best to spin things in a positive direction. Frankly, that’s why I typically preach verse by verse through entire books of the Bible. It forces me to grapple with the challenging passages. It forces me to preach sermons that aren’t always warm and fuzzy. It forces me to say difficult things to the people God has placed under my care even as I seek to comfort and assure them of God’s amazing grace.

On the other hand, there is freedom in this passage for me as well. I am not responsible for how God’s people receive God’s Word. That’s worth repeating over and over again to myself. I am NOT responsible for how God’s people receive God’s Word. I am simply the messenger. Simply the herald. Simply the watchman. I cannot control how people respond. So when someone tells me “they didn’t get anything out of the sermon”, that’s on them. Hopefully they will reflect on what’s keeping them from hearing and receiving the Word God has for them. Or when someone tells me “that’s the best sermon I’ve ever heard” and then go out the door and do the opposite of what I just talked about...again, that’s not my responsibility. I can grieve for them. Weep over them. Pray to God on their behalf. But ultimately, my job is simply to deliver the message as faithfully as I can.

This passage is not just for preachers by the way! Every single Christian is made a watchman or watchwoman over their families, friends, co-workers, fellow students, and the other people God has placed in your life. Every Christian is called by God to deliver God's Word to the lost and lonely in our world. Shame on us if we let our fear or anxiety or introversion or personal struggles get in the way. God is clear. If we don't sound the warning, the blood of those we love is on our hands. Ask Christ for the boldness to proclaim the gospel to those in your life today!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 7-9, Hebrews 5, Psalms 105:1-15, Proverbs 26:28

November 4, 2019
IMPECCABILITY

Readings for today: Ezekiel 7-9, Hebrews 5, Psalms 105:1-15, Proverbs 26:28

During my first session over here in Ethiopia, a young Ethiopian church planter asked about the sinlessness of Christ. Was He able to sin? Were the temptations He faced real? Can Christ truly identify with us in our weakness? Did He have a fallen human nature like us? These are questions with huge implications and ones the church has been wrestling over for two thousand years.

The Book of Hebrews is one of my favorites because it pushes to embrace the fullness of both Christ's divine nature and His human nature without diminishing either one. Over the course of history, Christians have tended to emphasize one at the expense of the other. Our human minds simply cannot grasp the mystery of the incarnation so we bring Jesus down to our level. We reduce Him to terms we can understand and grasp. We elevate certain aspects of his nature over and against others. We try to confine Him. Restrain Him. Fence Him in. But Jesus is not a tame God. He will not be domesticated to our theological agendas no matter how well-meaning they may be. He refuses to allow us to define Him and instead presents Himself to us on His terms – and His terms alone – through His Word.

“For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” (Hebrews 2:16-18)

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:15-16)

“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.” (Hebrews 5:7-10)

The author of the Book of Hebrews clearly believes Jesus was human in every respect. Subject to pain and suffering. Hardship and heartbreak. Hunger. Thirst. Weariness. Sadness and joy. Christ emptied Himself of all His heavenly power and glory in order to become one of us. One with us. As such, He inherited the fallen human nature and was tempted in every way just as we are so He might – through perfect obedience – become the eternal high priest we so desperately need.

The doctrine of impeccability teaches us that it was impossible for Christ to sin. Being God, He not only would not sin, He literally could not sin. This, I submit to you, is yet another attempt to pierce the mystery that is Christ. It is an attempt to use human logic to make sense of the Incarnation. Can God sin? Of course not. Is Jesus God? Absolutely. So Jesus cannot sin? According to the Book of Hebrews, the possibility IS on the table. He was made like us in every way. He suffered when being tempted. He sympathizes with us in our weaknesses. He was tempted in every way just as we are. He learned obedience through His suffering. In short, He became the 2nd Adam and through His life, death, and resurrection offers Himself up for us all. Does any of this make logical sense? No. But God's ways are

higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than our thoughts. His wisdom is unsearchable. And His faithfulness eternal.

So I took the young church planter to the Book of Hebrews. We read over these verses together. We reaffirmed our absolute commitment to a sinless Christ. Not because He could not sin but because He would not sin. Choosing instead a life of perfect obedience to His Heavenly Father's will. We rejoiced together at the immense sacrifice Christ offered by taking on a fallen human nature and sanctifying it from within. We celebrated the fact that He reigns in heaven even now as our great high priest, eternally offering Himself in our place. We were overcome with gratitude with the idea that because of what Christ has done for us, we can now approach the throne of grace with confidence knowing we will find mercy and grace to help us in our time of need.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 10-11, Hebrews 6, Psalms 105:16-36, Proverbs 27:1-2

November 5, 2019
ILLUSION OF CONTROL

Readings for today: Ezekiel 10-11, Hebrews 6, Psalms 105:16-36, Proverbs 27:1-2

“Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.” (Proverbs 27:1)

We began interviewing the church planters here in Ethiopia yesterday. The stories they share are always inspiring. Miracles of healing. Miracles of resurrection. Miraculous deliverance from addiction and demonic possession. All to advance the cause of the gospel in an area that is 98% Muslim and hostile to Christianity. The thousands who have responded to God’s call and given their lives to Christ face tremendous persecution. They are cast out of their homes. They are driven from their families. They lose jobs. They are exiled from their community. Some are even killed for their faith.

One young woman is planting a church in the Harar region. Harar is the 4th holiest city in Islam. It is a beautiful place full of incredible history. But there is political unrest in the area. Over here, politics are always mixed with religious faith. Different tribes hold to different faiths. So the issues are complex and multivalent. There are riots and protests across the zone. Many have been injured or killed. Her congregation is afraid for their lives so they have fled the area. Only she remains. And she knows tomorrow is not guaranteed. Still she preaches Christ. Still she ministers to those who are hurting in her community. Still she prays for the salvation of those who seek her life.

What would you do if you knew there was no tomorrow? Many people I know would make a bucket list. They would take an exotic vacation. Do something they’ve never done before. They would scale Everest. Dive the Great Barrier Reef. Finally take the family to Hawaii. None of these are necessarily bad things but they are certainly not eternal things. The men and women we meet over here have given themselves fully over to God. He guides and directs their steps. Death is a constant companion. They see it all around them. They know there is no tomorrow. They know it is God who holds their lives in His hands.

Control is an illusion. We have no idea what tomorrow may bring. It may bring great glory or great tragedy. It may bring great success or great failure. It may bring new life or it may bring us face to face with death. We like to think we are in control. We make plans. We put money away. We work hard to retire early so we can live the “good life.” But we are meant for so much more! God designed us for eternity. He created us to bear His image and likeness to the world around us. He intends for us to make an eternal impact on those we love and live among. True fulfillment comes when we give everything over to God. All our time. All our treasure. All our talent. All our plans. All our best intentions. Even our future. Once give God control, we are set free. The things of this world no longer have a hold on us. The ways of this world no longer seem attractive to us. The kingdoms of this world no longer have any power over us.

What would you do if you knew there was no tomorrow? Would you spend your final hours sharing the gospel with everyone you can like the young woman I just met? Or would you spend those hours on yourself and those you love? Would you give those precious moments to temporary pleasure? Or would you leverage them for something eternal? The reality is tomorrow is never guaranteed. The only hope we have in this world or the next is Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 12:1-14:11, Hebrews 7:1-17, Psalms 105:37-45, Proverbs 27:3

November 6, 2019
LIVING THE GOSPEL

Readings for today: Ezekiel 12:1-14:11, Hebrews 7:1-17, Psalms 105:37-45, Proverbs 27:3

One of the strangest things about being a prophet in the Old Testament is the number of times God uses their lives to illustrate His coming judgment. Jeremiah wore a ruined loincloth, broke a flask, and bought a field in the midst of a siege. Each action an embodiment of God's judgment or salvation. Hosea married a prostitute and gave his children terrible names like "not loved" and "not my people" to illustrate the faithless nature of Israel. Ezekiel lay on his side for hundreds of days, cut off his hair and his beard, and packed a bag for exile to communicate God's righteous judgment on His people. Can you imagine God commanding you to do the same? What would that even look like in our world today?

Thankfully, you and I don't have to imagine. Our call is not to embody God's judgment. Christ perfectly satisfied the demands of God's justice on the cross. He turned away God's wrath from our sin. He took on Himself the punishment we deserved. He became the embodiment of sin in order to win our salvation. So unlike the prophets of old, we no longer have to walk around naked, shave our heads, marry prostitutes, or do anything else to communicate God's judgment on our friends and neighbors.

Instead, we are called to embody the gospel. We are called to make our lives a living demonstration of God's grace. We are called to love our neighbors. Pray for our enemies. Preach to the lost. Care for the poor. We are called to be humble and meek. Peacemakers in a violent and angry world. We are called to tear down every wall that divides us one from another whether it be politics, race, sexuality, or any other high thing that would set itself up against the Kingdom of God. The resources God gives us to accomplish this great task are prayer, fasting, meditation on God's Word, corporate worship, preaching, participation in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and a host of other things the people of God have done down through the ages to remind themselves of God's abiding presence and power in their lives.

So how are you proclaiming Christ with your life? Do the people around you recognize Christ's presence in you? Do they hear from you the good news of the gospel? How will you seek to bring glory to your Savior today?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 14:12-16:41, Hebrews 7:18-28, Psalms 106:1-12, Proverbs 27:4-6

November 7, 2019
THE GREAT HIGH PRIEST

Readings for today: Ezekiel 14:12-16:41, Hebrews 7:18-28, Psalms 106:1-12, Proverbs 27:4-6

God is eternally consistent. From the beginning to the end of Scripture, a single story unfolds. God creates the universe and all that is in it. It is good. It is beautiful. It is right and true. He makes a man. Made in His own image. Places him in creation as a “priest” of sorts. One who exercises dominion over all God has made. One who keeps the Garden and makes it flourish. One who lives for God and His glory. But Adam fell into sin. The original high priest unfaithful. The impact is devastating. All of creation falls into ruin for lack of a faithful high priest who will present her to God holy and without spot, wrinkle or blemish.

Time moves on. Another priest is called. Noah. Set apart by God to exercise dominion over a new creation. The new world that emerges from the flood. But again, the high priestly line fails. Rather than be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth; they stick together. They build a tower. A temple to their own name. God looks down. Confuses their languages. Scatters them across the earth.

More time passes. Another priest. Abram. Called out of Ur, he will be the father of a new nation. They will become a holy priesthood. A people for God’s own possession set apart to exercise dominion over the earth. They are to walk in the light of God and teach the other nations to do the same. Once again, the high priestly line fails. They turn inward. They hoard the blessings of God. They become entitled. Prideful. They scorn the Gentiles they are called to serve. God punishes them and sends them into exile.

God goes silent. Four hundred years. God raises up yet another high priest. His only begotten Son. Jesus becomes one of us. Takes on human flesh. Assumes a broken human nature. He lives among us. Walks among us. Teaches us. Heals us. Suffers for us. Dies for us. He experiences all that human life has to offer. The good. The bad. The ugly. All so He can fully and rightfully represent us before the Father. At the same time, He remains God. His divine nature is never relinquished. So He can fully and rightfully take on the sins of the world. Jesus is the perfect high priest. His divine and human natures satisfying every aspect of the covenant God first made back in the Garden.

This is what makes Jesus unique. Superior to every angel and every prophet who has come before or after Him. He plays His unique, high priestly role even now on your behalf. And because His sacrifice has been accepted “He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” (Hebrews 7:25) Friends, you are set free. Receive the free gift of salvation from your high priest and place your trust and confidence in Him!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 16:42-17:24, Hebrews 8, Psalms 106:13-31, Proverbs 27:7-9

November 8, 2019

EVANGELISM

Readings for today: Ezekiel 16:42-17:24, Hebrews 8, Psalms 106:13-31, Proverbs 27:7-9

“Thus says the Lord God: "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it." (Ezekiel 17:22-24)

I have seen the partial fulfillment of this prophecy. I have the incredible privilege of being part of a church planting movement in the Horn of Africa called the Petros Network. Over the last several years, God has planted almost 5,000 churches. Almost 600,000 people have come to Christ in remote villages where the name of Jesus has never been heard or known. God is taking sprigs from the lofty top of the cedar and planting them in different places all over the earth. He is planting His church in places like Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, Djibouti, and Myanmar. These are some of the darkest places on earth. The church planters face incredible hardship and difficulty. They are often persecuted, tortured, and some are even killed on the field. But still they persist. Because God has called them. God is with them. And God is using them to change entire villages, tribes, and nations.

I visited one such church this week. It is planted in a remote village on top of a mountain many kilometers from the nearest city. The pastor is young. The congregation is mainly women and children. Before the church planter came to the village, the name of Jesus was unknown. The village struggled. There was a lot of fear. A lot of disease. A lot of conflict. But when the church planter began preaching the gospel, miracles began to take place. Many people were healed. Many demons were cast out. The spirit of darkness lifted. The villagers were set free. The joy on their faces was evident. Their love for one another obvious. Their passion to worship Jesus inspiring. Clearly, this church has grown and borne much fruit. It has become a noble cedar in that area. Under its boughs, many have come to dwell and find rest. And the church planter already has set his eyes and heart on other nearby villages. He wants to take a sprig from the cedar of his church and plant it in the next unreached village. I imagine when we come back in six months to a year, his church will have planted one or two more new churches. This is how the Kingdom grows.

Now consider your church. What sprigs is God taking from your church to plant in other towns or cities? What sprigs is God taking from your church plant in other areas in your community? What sprigs is God taking from your church to plant in other places all around the world? To put it more plainly, has your church planted other churches in areas where the gospel is not known? Has your church planted new ministries in your community in order to reach the lost for Jesus? Has your church sent missionaries and mission teams around the world to partner with the global church to expand the Kingdom?

To make it even more personal, what about you? How are you engaging in the work of evangelism right now in your life? Who are the lost people God is using you to make a gospel impact? In what ways are you seeking to serve your community and bless others in the name of Jesus? When you look at your schedule or you balance your checkbook, how many of your resources are going towards the expansion of God's Kingdom on earth? Remember, the one who sows sparingly reaps sparingly. The one who sows generously reaps generously. Are you reaping an eternal reward? Are you storing up treasures in heaven? Is your life becoming a noble cedar? Is God sending the lost and lonely and hurting and broken to find rest and healing and comfort under your care?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 18-19, Hebrews 9:1-10, Psalms 106:32-48, Proverbs 27:10

November 9, 2019
A LIFE GOD HONORS

Readings for today: Ezekiel 18-19, Hebrews 9:1-10, Psalms 106:32-48, Proverbs 27:10

Jesus said, “If you love me, keep my commands.” God loves the righteous. God loves the man or woman who aligns their lives with His Law. God blesses those who submit their lives to Him. Surrender their ways to Him. Give control over to Him. God wants us to be holy even as He is holy. He created us for His glory. He designed us to bear His image into the world. What does such a life look like?

Listen to how Ezekiel describes it, “If a man is righteous and does what is just and right— if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman in her time of menstrual impurity, does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not lend at interest or take any profit, withholds his hand from injustice, executes true justice between man and man, walks in my statutes, and keeps my rules by acting faithfully—he is righteous; he shall surely live, declares the Lord God.” (Ezekiel 18:5-9)

Now some will immediately raise the objection of legalism. They will suggest that attempting to live according to God's Law is an attempt to justify ourselves before God. They will warn of the danger of trying to earn God's favor. Earn God's love. Earn our own salvation. Nothing could be farther from Ezekiel's mind. Faithful Jews throughout history have never been legalists. Faithful Jews have always understood they are saved by faith in Yahweh. They know the story of Abraham well. However, what faithful Jews also know is that faith always comes to expression in real life. James was a faithful Jew and when he came to faith, he continued to teach what he already knew. “Faith without works is dead.” One cannot claim to believe in Christ and not walk in His ways. One cannot claim to know Christ and ignore His commands. One cannot claim to trust Christ and reject His law. Those who are truly saved understand we are not only saved from something – sin – but we are saved for something – good works. The same works the prophet Ezekiel refers to in the passage cited above.

What is righteousness? It is believing in God to the point where you trust Him with your life. It is being confident in God to the point where you stake your life on His promises. It is trusting God more than your emotions. More than your logic. More than your ability. More than your wealth or position or power or privilege. The people Ezekiel is preaching to needed to be reminded what a life lived for God looks like in real time. It involves worship with God's people. Sexual purity. Integrity in our financial dealings. Generous giving to the poor and less fortunate. Working for justice. These are the markers of a life of great faithfulness and they give evidence of a heart fully surrendered to God.

So where is your heart today? If someone were to follow you around and make a documentary of your life, what would the people around you see? Would they see clear evidence of a life lived for God? Or a life lived for oneself? Would they see your faith take concrete expression in acts of mercy and love? Or would they see hypocrisy? Would they see a righteous life? The kind of life God honors? Or would they see a life lived in pursuit of worldly goods and worldly goals? Friends, God longs to bless you. God longs to bring you peace. God longs to help you. Heal you. Restore your soul. But God will not bless the unrighteous life. He will not bless a life lived in rebellion to Him. A life lived in apathy towards Him. A life that is dismissive of Him. Turn to Christ. Cling to His truth and follow His way that you may receive His life.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 20, Hebrews 9:11-28, Psalms 107, Proverbs 27:11

November 10, 2019

SCRIPTURES FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Ezekiel 20, Hebrews 9:11-28, Psalms 107, Proverbs 27:11

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 23, Hebrews 10:18-39, Psalms 109, Proverbs 27:13

November 11, 2019
CHRIST, OUR GREAT SAVIOR

Readings for today: Ezekiel 23, Hebrews 10:18-39, Psalms 109, Proverbs 27:13

“Although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior.” - John Newton

John Newton was a great sinner. Pressed into service in the Royal Navy at a young age, he ended up a captain in the slave trade. He purchased human beings, held them in deplorable conditions in the hold of his ships, and transported them to the West Indies where he sold them for profit. Three times he traversed the dreaded Triangle. And even after his days as a captain came to an end, he still invested heavily in the slave trade itself. Newton was saved during a storm on March 10, 1748 though he would not mark his full conversion until much later. He became an abolitionist in 1788 with the publication of *Thoughts upon the Slave Trade* where he described the horror of the conditions aboard the slave ships during the Middle Passage. In that book, he makes "a confession, which ... comes too late ... It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders." John Newton understood the depths of his sin.

The passage from Ezekiel today is a tough one. It describes in graphic terms how God feels about our sin. He likens it to sexual depravity of the worst kind. He describes the faithlessness of both Israel and Judah as spiritual adultery. He accuses them of lusting after other gods. Inviting them into their beds. Sleeping with them over and over again. The people of God are shameless in their spiritual prostitution. They are enslaved to their perverted desires. They show little to no restraint. Frankly, it sounds very familiar. I cannot tell you the number of conversations I've had over the last two decades with Christian believers whose lives reflect the same shamelessness. Claiming to know Christ, they embrace a sinful lifestyle. Greed. Lust. Pride. Bitterness. Anger. Selfishness. Their lives are marked by the works of the flesh rather than the fruit of the Spirit. (Galatians 5:18-24) As such, they are the people the author of Hebrews is referring to when he writes, "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Hebrews 10:26-31)

Friends, God takes our sin seriously and we would be lost except for His amazing grace. No matter how dark the stains of your sin. No matter how deep the corruption in your life runs. No matter how heavy the load of guilt and shame. No matter how great your sin, Christ is greater still! "Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." (Hebrews 10:19-25) God never lets His people go. Yes, Israel played the whore but God was faithful to restore her after the exile. Yes, John Newton engaged in the horrors of the slave trade but God was

faithful to rescue him and use him to abolish the slave trade once and for all. Yes, I am a great sinner but God is always faithful to forgive me for my sin and cleanse me from my unrighteousness. His grace is truly amazing to save a wretch like me!

What about you? Do you understand the depths of your sinful condition before God? Do you grasp the darkness that pervades your soul? We are conceived in sin and brought forth in iniquity. Each of us goes his or her own way. We have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory. But the promise of God is if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us. Cleanse us. Sanctify us. And make us more into the image of His Son.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 24-26, Hebrews 11:1-61, Psalms 110, Proverbs 27:14

November 12, 2019
BY FAITH

Readings for today: Ezekiel 24-26, Hebrews 11:1-16, Psalms 110, Proverbs 27:14

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1)

Some say faith is blind. Some say faith is foolish. Some say faith is an opiate of sorts for the masses. A delusion we are indoctrinated into by religious institutions. That’s not how the Bible defines faith. It is a fundamental belief. A conviction that what remains unseen is nonetheless very real. It is an assurance for the future where all our hopes and dreams for eternity will come to pass. It is ultimately a deep and abiding trust in God and His plan for our lives and for our world.

Hebrews 11 is rightly called the “Hall of Fame” of faith. It lists the many heroes and heroines who walked by faith. Abel offered a better sacrifice than Cain. Why? Because he offered it in faith. Enoch did not taste death. Why? Because he walked with God. Noah risked it all to build an ark. Why? Because he loved God more than he loved the things of this world. Abraham left home, kindred, and country. He left behind all that was familiar. All that was safe. All that was secure. Why? Because he had his eyes fixed on a better country. A heavenly one. Sarah embraced a miraculous pregnancy in her old age. She carried Isaac to term though the toll on her body must have been enormous. She risked her life to bring the child of promise into the world. Why? Because she knew God was faithful. The list goes on and on. And it’s not meant to be exhaustive. It’s meant to be illustrative. To encourage those of us who are still fighting the good fight of faith in this world. Who are still sojourning on this earth that is not our home. It’s written to encourage those of us who are still seeking a homeland, eternal in the heavens. The place where God dwells.

What does walking by faith look like for you today? In what areas of your life are you being called to trust God? How are you placing your life, your future, your hopes and your dreams into His hands? Are you intentionally seeking to live by faith? Remember, “without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6) Living by faith requires intentionality. Walking by faith requires self-discipline. It means dying to self every moment of every day. Laying aside the desires of the flesh in favor of the fruit of the Spirit. It means trusting God to reveal His will in His time. It means taking all that we are and all that we have and placing it at God’s disposal to use as He sees fit. It means walking with open hands before the Lord, allowing Him to guide and direct our steps.

I can tell you from personal experience there is nothing more exciting and nothing more daunting than following Christ. You end up on these amazing journeys you never thought possible. You have these experiences you never would have imagined. You get taken to the end of your own wisdom and strength and resources again and again as God teaches you to rely on Him. It’s not easy. It’s often scary. But God is faithful and He delivers on His promises. Make your decision right now to live this day by faith!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 27-28, Hebrews 11:17-31, Psalms 111, Proverbs 27:15-16

November 13, 2019
PRIDE: THE DEADLIEST OF SINS

Readings for today: Ezekiel 27-28, Hebrews 11:17-31, Psalms 111, Proverbs 27:15-16

One of the besetting sins of humanity is our pride. Like Adam, we truly want to become our own gods. Human history is replete with example after example of what happens when a person or tribe or nation achieves a certain measure of power, wealth, and privilege. They become proud. Arrogant. They forget God. They ignore God. They replace God. The most megalomaniacal even believe they've become God. Pharaoh is simply one of the many examples we could cite just from the Bible much less other ancient/modern sources.

Interestingly enough, those who would be gods almost always fall into the same pattern. They almost always make the same mistake. In an effort to prove their "godliness", they build monuments to themselves. Monuments to their own glory. Monuments that stretch as high as possible, reaching up towards the heavens. Think of the Tower of Babel. Think of the obelisks and images and pyramids of Pharaoh. Think of the temples and palaces and structures archaeologists have discovered all over the world in almost every great culture. Now think of our own time. Think of our own country. Think of how those who would be god build monuments to themselves through social media. Marketing. Advertising. The goal is to have the #1 hit single. The #1 bestseller. The largest, multi-national corporation. The most political influence and clout. They use their resources to self-promote, all in an effort to make their own name great. Pastors and churches are not immune. The goal for many is to draw the largest crowds. Raise the most funds. Build the biggest buildings on sprawling campuses across the country.

Do we not realize the risk we are running here? We who would be great should take heed from the warnings God has given through the prophet Ezekiel especially to the kings of Tyre. "You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle; and crafted in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created they were prepared. You were an anointed guardian cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till unrighteousness was found in you. In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence in your midst, and you sinned; so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, and I destroyed you, O guardian cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire. Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor. I cast you to the ground; I exposed you before kings, to feast their eyes on you. By the multitude of your iniquities, in the unrighteousness of your trade you profaned your sanctuaries; so I brought fire out from your midst; it consumed you, and I turned you to ashes on the earth in the sight of all who saw you. All who know you among the peoples are appalled at you; you have come to a dreadful end and shall be no more forever." (Ezekiel 28:12-19) Whew. This pride thing is no joke!

A couple of years ago, during a time of prayer, the Lord spoke to me. You see, I am as ambitious as the next person. I am as prideful as any. My heart longs for success and recognition. I too would love to see my name in lights. So the Lord confronted me. And He gave me three words to guide the rest of my life.

Obscurity: God has commanded me to labor in obscurity. To be content with where He has me. To never seek another position. Never seek another raise. Never seek another opportunity. To simply walk with open hands before Him.

Anonymity: God has commanded me to embrace anonymity. To never self-promote. Never seek to make my name great. Never seek out recognition or pride of place. To let others take the credit and in fact, spend my life and influence promoting others above myself.

Insignificance: God has commanded me to acknowledge my insignificance. In the grand sweep of God's eternal plan, my contributions are very small. I am not an essential cog in this machine. I am not irreplaceable. I simply am one servant among billions who is being called to play his very minor role in God's Kingdom.

Does all this mean success is evil? Does all this mean wealth and power and privilege are to be resisted? Does all this mean we should never aspire to anything? Never work hard? Never try our best? Anyone who knows me, knows that cannot be true. The key is our motivation. True humility is not thinking more of oneself than one ought or less of oneself than one ought. Rather it is thinking of oneself less. Again, it means walking with open hands before the Lord. Letting Him fill them up with His plans for your life.

As I've learned to walk with an open heart before the Lord, it's been amazing to see where He's taken me. Humbling to see what He's entrusted me with. Leadership in an incredible church. A certain degree of influence in my denomination. An adjunct faculty position at Denver Seminary. Opportunities to teach overseas and help lead a revival in the Horn of Africa. He's taught me how to be a better husband and father. A better friend and neighbor. All of this came to me from God's own hands. I did not seek it out nor was I remotely qualified on paper for most of these positions. God simply moved me like a pawn on His great chessboard as He works out His will for the world. And I am happy and content to play my part.

What about you? Do you find yourself aspiring to greatness? Seeking to achieve all you can? Accumulate all you can? Earn the recognition of your peers? What drives you? What feeds your ambition? Is it the Lord or is it your pride? Heed the words of Ezekiel. Take care lest you follow in the footsteps of Pharaoh. Humble yourself before the Lord and let Him guide your steps.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 29-30, Hebrews 11:32-12:13, Psalms 112, Proverbs 27:17

November 14, 2019
OF WHOM THE WORLD IS UNWORTHY...

Readings for today: Ezekiel 29-30, Hebrews 11:32-12:13, Psalms 112, Proverbs 27:17

“And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.” Hebrews 11:32-38)

Over the course of the last twenty years of ministry, I have met Gideon. Barak. Samson. Jephthah. David. Samuel. Deborah. Sarah. Priscilla. Junia. Godly men and women who endure great hardship. Persecution. Suffering. Even death. They are often filled with great power. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, they perform miracles of healing. They cast out demons. They raise the dead. I have also seen them feed the hungry. Care for the sick. Visit those in prison. These seemingly mundane actions are just as miraculous as the signs and wonders according to Scripture.

Why do they sacrifice so much? What motivates such people to pour themselves out and place themselves at risk for the sake of the gospel? It is Jesus. They look “Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:2) They see what Christ has done for us. How Christ poured Himself out for us. Emptied Himself of all His glory. Left the riches of heaven to become poor for our sake’s. Jesus gave it all. Jesus paid it all. Jesus surrendered all. And as they keep their eyes fixed on Him, they find themselves responding in much the same way.

Sacrifice should come naturally to the Christian. While the flesh may resist, a regenerated heart should warm to the idea of giving all that we have to Jesus. A soul renewed by the Holy Spirit will find it’s greatest fulfillment in serving Christ. On some level, it shouldn’t even have to be taught. It’s not like all the men and women listed in Hebrews 11 underwent seminary training or a 12 week discipleship course or even had Bibles to read in a year! :-) God called. They answered. God commanded. They went. God raised them up. They obeyed. Not perfectly. Not always faithfully. But on balance - over the course of their lives - they believed God and trusted in His promises.

These are the witnesses that surround us even now. They cheer us on from the heavenly realm. They understand that this world is a battlefield where the Lord is waging His stubborn war for the souls of humankind. They once walked in our shoes. They know the suffering we endure. They know what it’s like to feel anxiety and fear and pain. But they also know the power of faith. Through Christ, they overcame the world and they know we can as well. Why is the world not worthy of such people? Because this world is not our home. This world is passing away. This world groaning and laboring and waiting for the new creation. You and I were not made for this world. We were never meant to live forever in this world. We were created for a different home. A heavenly home. A place where there is no crying or suffering or pain. A place where there is no more darkness or night. A safe place where sin and evil are cast out once and for all. This is the world we look to in Christ Jesus. This is the world guaranteed us by Christ’s saving death and resurrection.

So don't hold on to the things of this world. Don't pursue the temporary pleasures it has to offer. Don't spend your energy and time and resources chasing the wind. Instead, give all you have to the Lord. Embrace His will. Walk in His way. Serve Christ and you will receive the eternal rewards He promises to all who believe!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 31-32, Hebrews 12:14-29, Psalms 113-114, Proverbs 27:18-20

November 15, 2019

WHY BE HOLY?

Readings for today: Ezekiel 31-32, Hebrews 12:14-29, Psalms 113-114, Proverbs 27:18-20
“Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”
(Hebrews 12:14)

Holiness has fallen on hard times. In my experience, very few Christians desire holiness much less “strive” for it. We much prefer grace. We much prefer unconditional love. We much prefer a god who never judges. Never confronts. Never demands. Consider the rash of pastors who have fallen recently into sexual or financial sin. Almost without exception they refuse to submit to any kind of disciplinary process. Almost without exception they end up starting new churches with names like “second chance” or “sanctuary.” And almost without exception their “new” message is all about love. All about the radical nature of God’s grace. All about the unconditional nature of God’s forgiveness. What’s rarely preached is the need for repentance. An intentional turning away from our sin. The clear expectation from Scripture that those who follow Christ will deny themselves and pursue a life of holiness before the Lord.

Israel understood the importance of holiness. After all, they were confronted by God Himself at Mt. Sinai and it clearly left an impression! “For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, ‘If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.’” Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” (Hebrews 12:18-21) Imagine being in the congregation and hearing God’s voice like the sound of thunder. Imagine being brought to your knees at the sight of God descending from heaven and lighting an entire mountaintop on fire. Imagine an experience of God so terrifying, you fall on your face in fear for your life. This is what Israel encountered in the wilderness after they had been delivered from slavery in Egypt. And the call of God to His people was clear. “Be holy as I am holy.”

Fast forward to Jesus. To the saving death and resurrection of Christ. Christians are living in light of the 2nd Exodus. The great deliverance of God’s people from sin. No longer do we need to be afraid. Christ has taken the punishment we deserve on Himself. Christ has satisfied the just demands of the Law. Christ has turned aside the Father’s righteous anger by taking our place. So rather than approach God in fear, we can approach God in confidence. “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” (Hebrews 12:22-24) As we gaze into heaven itself, our hearts should be filled with an even greater desire for holiness. An even greater desire for righteousness. Motivated by the great love God has shown for us, we turn aside from our sin. Surrender to His will. Deny our base desires and walk in the obedience He demands.

Is this legalism? No. Legalism is the outward adherence to the Law with no inward change in the heart. Is this works righteousness? No. We cannot earn God’s favor or love through our own effort. Is this dead religion? No. Going through the motions of empty ritual has nothing to do with holiness. The motivation that drives our striving for holiness comes from an eternally grateful heart for the gift God has given. “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken...” This is why we pursue holiness. This is why we approach the throne of grace with reverence and awe. This is why we offer to God the worship He demands and the worship He deserves. For God indeed is a consuming fire. He consumes all that is sinful inside us as He makes us more like Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 33-34, Hebrews 13, Psalms 115, Proverbs 27:21-22

November 16, 2019

GOD'S ETERNAL PLAN OF SALVATION

Readings for today: Ezekiel 33-34, Hebrews 13, Psalms 115, Proverbs 27:21-22

Today and tomorrow's reading in Ezekiel brings with it a cascade of images. Watchmen. Shepherds. Scattered sheep. New covenants. Ancient prophecies. Culminating in one of the most beautiful promises in the Old Testament...the gift of God's Spirit. Is there a thread that ties this all together? Or does God simply have too many tabs open in His browser? Is there a common tie or theme or guiding principle at work here? Or is God doing His best "Jackson Pollock" impersonation? Sometimes when we read the Old Testament, especially in the prophetic literature, it can feel scattershot. Like a bunch of random events some scribe collated at a later date, none necessarily having to do with any other.

Today, however, is different. There is a thread that weaves itself throughout these chapters. Building towards a beautiful crescendo where God Himself promises to invade time and space to perform heart surgery on His people. It all starts with this idea of the "watchman." Watchmen were essential in the ancient world. They stood guard on the walls of the village. Day and night they faithfully manned their posts. Never resting. Never sleeping. They bore a great responsibility. The safety of their people rested on their shoulders. Should an enemy invade, it was the watchman who would give warning. Should natural disaster strike, it was the watchman who often saw it coming. When the watchman gave warning, it was up to the people to respond. To take action. God tells Ezekiel he is to act as a watchman for Israel. To sound the warning when he sees them falling into sin. To point out where they are wandering off the path of righteousness. To challenge them to turn from their sin and return to God. If Ezekiel is faithful, he will potentially save his people. If he is faithless and refuses to speak up, he will have failed his people and their blood will be on his hands.

Why such a drastic call to action? Because the shepherds God has placed over His people are corrupt. Instead of caring for the sheep, they actually feed off them. Instead of protecting the sheep, they let them wander all over the place. Instead of seeking those that are lost, they abandon them to their fate. These faithless shepherds are only concerned with themselves. They've grown fat and lazy. They use the sheep to further their own purposes. Their own agenda. To enrich themselves and make their names great.

God looks down on His people. They are scattered and suffering. Lonely and afraid. Lost and wandering. Wounded and weak. Injured and hurting. And this pierces God's heart. So He takes action. "For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out...I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness...I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land...I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land...I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice." (Ezekiel 34:11-16) It's an unbelievable promise. God renewing His gracious and glorious covenant with Israel!

Why would God do such a thing? For the sake of His great name. "Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will

vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.” (Ezekiel 36:22-23) Remember, God’s primary concern from creation to redemption to final glorification is His own glory. His own honor. His own reputation. God will make His name famous on the earth. God will make Himself known among the nations. God’s name will be lifted up! God will be worshipped in the way He deserves and the way He demands! One day, every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth! And what’s happening here in Ezekiel is just a foretaste of what’s to come.

So how will God make this happen? How will He take a stubborn and rebellious and sinful people and turn them into worshippers? Listen to what God Himself says He will do, “I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.” (Ezekiel 36:24-28) Isn’t this amazing? God is not content to sit up in heaven and wait for us to get it right. He isn’t going to sit back and watch as we work our tails off to get to Him. He isn’t going to stand by as we struggle and suffer and fight the forces of darkness that attack us on every side. No. He WILL rescue! He WILL redeem! He WILL save! He lifts us up. Holds us in His arms. Bathes us in His grace. Transplants our broken hearts. Infuses us with His very Spirit. Gives us new desires. New appetites. New loves. And so we find ourselves walking in God’s ways. Obeying His rules. Living by His commands. Not because we have to but because we want to! Not because we’re forced to but because we long to show our devotion to our Heavenly Father! Not out of fear or anxiety of what might happen if we make a mistake but from a deep sense of peace and security that flows from our confidence in the unconditional love of God.

This, friends, is God’s plan. From eternity. Before the heavens and the earth were made, God predestined us in love to enjoy the riches of His grace!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 35-36, James 1:1-18, Psalms 116, Proverbs 27:23-27

November 17, 2019
SCRIPTURES FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Ezekiel 35-36, James 1:1-18, Psalms 116, Proverbs 27:23-27

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 37-38, James 1:19-2:17, Psalms 117, Proverbs 28:1

November 18, 2019
DRY BONES

Readings for today: Ezekiel 37-38, James 1:19-2:17, Psalms 117, Proverbs 28:1

I love the vision of the valley of dry bones. I can almost picture Ezekiel there in the midst of all that death. Preaching. Prophesying. And I can imagine his astonishment as the bones begin to come together. Sinews begin to form. Lungs filling with the breath of God Himself. It's a vision of resurrection. A vision of new creation. A vision of renewal and revitalization. A reminder that with God hope is never fully lost.

I have been to the valley of dry bones in my life. I have been there personally. I have been there professionally. One of the things I love most about my work is the time I get to spend with congregations who have plateaued or are experiencing decline. They often feel dry and listless. Their energies and resources are spent. Their hope is almost gone. I often use this passage to lead them back to God's vision for their church. God's vision for their ministry. God's vision for their mission to the community in which they are planted. I use this text to help them dream again. To help them discover new possibilities. To help them see the future God has for them.

Sometimes I get to see the dry bones come together. Sometimes I get to see muscles and sinews begin to form. Sometimes I get to watch as God breathes new life into His people and the congregation comes alive. They rediscover God's purpose. They reaffirm God's promise. They revitalize with God's power. It's an awesome thing to witness. Sadly, sometimes the bones remain dry. Muscles and sinews refuse to form. The valley remains eerily quiet and deathly calm. And the congregation dies a slow, inexorable death. It's heartbreaking.

I see this happen in individual lives as well. I think of the young woman who comes to me seeking counsel for a broken marriage. She and her husband are at odds. The children are caught in the middle. She's struggling at work. Struggling at home. Struggling in almost every area of her life. But she responds to God's Word. She is open to God's Spirit. And slowly but surely the bones of her life begin to come together as God breathes new life into her soul. Then I think of the young man I know. He too is struggling in his marriage. He too is struggling as a father. He too is struggling at work and at home and in almost every area of his life. But he refuses to submit to God's Word. He remains closed to God's Spirit. His bones never move and he continues it's descent into chaos and pain.

We all have choices to make. Will our bones respond to the gospel? Will our bones respond to the preaching of God's Word? Will our bones respond to what God wants to do in and through us? Or will we remain dead in our sin? Dead in our choices? Dead in the decisions we make each day?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 39:1-40:27, James 2:18-3:18, Psalms 118:1-18, Proverbs 28:2

November 19, 2019

TRUE FAITH

Readings for today: Ezekiel 39:1-40:27, James 2:18-3:18, Psalms 118:1-18, Proverbs 28:2

One of the great scandals of the western church is the number of Christians who confess Jesus with their lips but deny Him with their lives. They say they believe in Jesus but only in the abstract. They claim to have faith in God but only if He remains distant and uninvolved in our lives. They claim saving faith but never submit their lives to Christ. We call them “nominal” Christians. “C&E” (Christmas and Easter) Christians. “Cultural” Christians. Mainly because we don’t want to appear judgmental. The Apostle James, on the other hand, pulls no punches. “Faith apart from works is dead.” (James 2:26)

What does it mean to believe in God? The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 10:9, “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” That seems clear enough except that far too many use this verse as an excuse NOT to obey God’s commands which certainly wasn’t what Paul had in mind. Clearly in James’ day, he was dealing with Christians who claimed a right belief in God but didn’t follow it up with right practice. This is why James makes this extraordinary statement, “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!” (James 2:19) He’s speaking to both the Jewish and Gentile believers of his own time and pointing out it isn’t enough to hold to an intellectual belief in the nature and character of God. Even the demons understand God’s divine nature! One must submit their life to God as well.

His argument is a persuasive one and deeply biblical. For support, he draws on the Abraham, the great paradigm of faith, and Rahab who ended up in the lineage of Christ. He makes the point that saving faith in their lives resulted in works. In fact, one would not be able to say that “Abraham believed God” unless Abraham willingly demonstrated that belief by offering up his only beloved son. In the same way, one would not be able to say that “Rahab believed God” unless she willingly demonstrated that belief by hiding the spies of Israel and sending the authorities on a wild goose chase. In both cases, faith was active alongside their works and faith came to completion or fulfillment by their works. Now I can already hear the protests. What about grace? I thought we were saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone? Absolutely we are! But what is equally clear is that salvation changes us. It transforms us. It gives us a new heart with new desires. A new spirit with new passions. We find ourselves longing to do God’s will. Longing to serve God’s purposes. Longing to follow God’s commands. Jesus Himself says, “If you love me, keep my commandments.” (John 14:15) When we try to separate our faith from our works, we are exposing our lack of true, saving faith. If we approach faith looking for the absolute minimum we need to do to be saved, we are not saved at all. It’s like trying to separate the body from the soul according to James. Such a dis-integration of the human being would result in death. The same is true when we try to separate our faith from our works.

So where do you find yourself this morning? Are you willing to take a ruthless self-inventory? Does your faith change the way you live your daily life? Does being a Christian make you a different spouse? Different parent? Different student? Different employer or employee? Does it make a you a different friend? Do you find yourself longing for worship? Longing for time with God? Longing to read His Word? Longing for prayer? Do you actively seek to submit every area of your life to His Law? Are you grieved over your sin? There is no better time than the present to repent, friends. Fall on your face before the Lord who loves you and gave His life for you. Turn to Him. Ask Him for forgiveness. Ask Him for the strength and wisdom and humility to submit to His will and His way. Confirm your saving faith with your work and rest in the assurance of salvation Christ will bring!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 40:28-41:26, James 4, Psalms 118:19-29, Proverbs 28:3-5

November 20, 2019
AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Readings for today: Ezekiel 40:28-41:26, James 4, Psalms 118:19-29, Proverbs 28:3-5

Real life in the real church is messy. The church of Jesus Christ - this side of heaven - is filled with sinful people who bring all kinds of baggage with them. In my experience as a pastor, hurting people tend to hurt people. Those who are in pain want everyone else to feel their pain. Broken people often try to break others without even realizing it. Life in this world is full of suffering. Trauma. Abuse. Heartbreak. We face trials of various kinds. Temptations around every corner. And we bring all that with us when we join a church. Perhaps that's why I love James 4:6 so much, "But God still gives more grace..."

It wasn't much different two thousand years ago. James, the brother of Jesus, was one of the key leaders in the church in Jerusalem as it was just getting started. He lived in a violent, turbulent time. The Jewish people were beginning to rise up against their Roman oppressors. Each rebellious movement was put down with greater force and greater violence. National unrest would finally break out in open war, resulting in the utter destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. Throughout this time period, James pastored the church. He pastored a group of Jewish Christians who were trying to figure out how to live the Jesus Life in the midst of all this uncertainty and conflict. They faced trials and tribulations. They suffered tremendously under the Romans as well as the Jewish religious authorities. They were persecuted on every side. One would think such hardship would bring them together. Cause them to link arms against their common adversaries. Unfortunately, this was not the case. They gossiped about each other. Showed partiality. Divided themselves along economic lines. Like all of us, they struggled with doubts and fears. They struggled with anger and frustration. Too many of them resisted putting their faith into action. They fought over position and influence and power. They aligned themselves too closely with the world and its corrupt values. Sound familiar?

Too often our response as Christians is to leave the church. We get our feelings hurt. We experience deep wounds. We are disappointed. Let down. Expectations go unmet. Rather than humble ourselves before the Lord and engage in the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation, we simply walk out the door. We think this solves our problem. We think this resolves our pain. But it only compounds our situation. We stall out spiritually. It's like we get stuck in an endless time loop. Never moving on until we actually do what Christ commands which is to leave our gift at the altar and first reconcile with our brothers and sisters. I've seen it so many times and it is heartbreaking.

What's the answer? Follow the biblical guidance from James. Consider it all joy when you face trials of various kinds. Trust God for wisdom to know how to handle each and every situation. Remain steadfast under trial. Be quick to listen and slow to speak. Be doers of the Word not just hearers. Show no partiality. Let Christ tame our tongues. Set our minds on heavenly wisdom which is pure, peaceful, gentle, open to reason and full of mercy. Humble ourselves before the Lord and each other so we will not quarrel or be driven by sinful desire. Live vulnerably before our brothers and sisters so we can receive prayer for healing and strength and be restored gently when we fall into sin. Do these things over the long haul and you will find yourself reflecting more and more the image of Christ. This is what the church ultimately is all about! It is the crucible of our sanctification. The very place where iron sharpens iron and one person sharpens another.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 42-43, James 5, Psalms 119:1-16, Proverbs 28:6-7

November 21, 2019
LOVING THE LAW OF GOD

Readings for today: Ezekiel 42-43, James 5, Psalms 119:1-16, Proverbs 28:6-7

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (John 14:15) Jesus’ words. Simple. Plain. True. Not if you want to earn my love, keep my commandments. Not if you want to be good enough for my love, keep my commandments. Not if you want to be worthy of my love, keep my commandments. Simply, “if you love me, keep me commandments.” The reality is we cannot love Jesus and reject His commandments. We cannot love Jesus and reject His ways. We cannot love Jesus and reject the Law of God in our lives.

While I was in Africa, my wife dropped my car off at the shop. The check engine light had come on. We weren’t sure what was wrong but thankfully we have a mechanic we can trust. The very first thing they did was hook the car up to a diagnostic machine to see if they could determine the problem. The Law of God operates in much the same way. It serves as a diagnostic for what’s truly going on in our hearts. When we read God’s Word, do we find ourselves naturally wanting to obey? Do we find ourselves aspiring to be more than we are? Do we experience the conviction of the Holy Spirit and a deep humbling in our hearts for how far we have fallen short? Do we repent? Do we experience regret? A godly sorrow? Or do we avoid God’s Law? Do we reject God’s Law? Do we find ourselves dismissing God’s Law as antiquated? Irrelevant? Impossible?

We don’t know for sure who penned the words of Psalm 119 but there is a tradition that tells us David wrote this Psalm in order to teach Solomon the “ABC’s” of the spiritual life. (The Psalm is arranged in stanzas according to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet.) David, as we know, was a “man after God’s own heart.” Why? Certainly, it had nothing to do with his behavior. Over and over again, David proved himself to be the chief of sinners. Just like you. Just like me. No, what set David apart was his great love for God’s Law. Despite his crimes. Despite his mistakes. Despite his failures. David never stopped loving God’s commands. Never stopped aspiring to them. Never stopped seeking to follow them all the days of his life. David’s love for the statutes, testimonies, and rules is expressed over and over again in this particular Psalm.

“Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord! Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways! You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently. Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes! Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments. I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous rules. I will keep your statutes; do not utterly forsake me! How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. Blessed are you, O Lord; teach me your statutes! With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.” (Psalms 119:1-16)

Many Christians today claim to love Jesus and yet reject His commandments. They claim to love God and yet reject His Truth and His Way. They believe God’s laws are culturally bound and therefore useless in today’s world. They argue that God’s laws are biased, privileged, and misogynistic. They argue God’s laws are too patriarchal and hierarchal and tyrannical. So they reject God’s Law. They reject God’s commands. They reject God’s ways. But this is pure hypocrisy. One cannot love God and

NOT love His commands. Jesus doesn't leave us that option. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

Now it's important to remember to distinguish between the ceremonial laws governing the worship life of ancient Israel. The civil laws governing the national life of ancient Israel. And the moral law which is timeless and eternal. Laws forbidding the eating of shrimp are NOT the same as laws governing sexual immorality. Laws forbidding the mixing of two fibers in clothing are NOT the same as laws governing violence and murder. David is addressing the moral law in Psalm 119 as is Jesus in John 14:15. These laws were put in place to teach us how to follow God faithfully. To live a godly and blameless life before Him. They were put in place to convict us when we fall short and instruct us when we seek wisdom.

So do you follow David's advice? Do you meditate on God's law? Day and night? Do you love God's commands? Believe they are what's best for your life?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 44:1-45:12, 1 Peter 1:1-12, Psalms 119:17-32, Proverbs 28:8-10

November 22, 2019
PERSECUTION

Readings for today: Ezekiel 44:1-45:12, 1 Peter 1:1-12, Psalms 119:17-32, Proverbs 28:8-10

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 1:3-7)

When I read a passage like this I cannot help but think of the hundreds of young men and women I've met overseas who endure incredible hardship and suffering to bring the gospel to their people. I think of a South Sudanese man whose family was sent to a refugee camp while he remained behind to minister in the middle of a civil war. I think of a Ugandan man who travels by bus, boat, donkey, and foot to get to the many churches he's planted to encourage and exhort them to hold fast to Jesus. I think of the men and women I've met in Eastern Ethiopia who are planting churches in Muslim villages. Their lives are often threatened. They meet in secret in homes. They've spent time in hospitals recovering from injuries and time in prison fighting false charges. They are my heroes and I treasure the time I have with them.

I think of Andrew Brunson. An EPC pastor who was imprisoned for two years in Turkey on false charges. He was harassed. Abused. Suffered through solitary confinement. His “trials” were a joke and the Turkish government sought to use him as leverage to get what they wanted from the United States. He suffered while in prison. He struggled with his faith. His story is a powerful one and he shares vulnerably about what happens when we come to the end of ourselves and find Jesus there waiting for us in the dark night of the soul.

The Apostle Peter was no stranger to suffering. He too battled through beatings and flogging and imprisonments. He was attacked and considered a traitor to the Jewish faith. But he persevered. He boldly proclaimed the gospel even though it would eventually cost him his life. Why? Why did so many of the early Christians sacrifice their very lives? Why have Christians down through the centuries endured such persecution with faith and hope? Why do many Christians around the world today suffer for the cause of Christ? It's because they believe wholeheartedly in an “inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

What about you? Do you hold fast to this same hope? When you face trials of various kinds, are you able to endure with joy? When you suffer or struggle or battle temptation, are you able to endure with faith? When you feel attacked or falsely accused or put down for your faith, are you able to persevere with hope? Do you fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith who with joy endured the cross, despising it's shame? If you do, you can trust the promise that your faith - tested and tried by the refining fires of this world - will turn out as gold. And your life will result in praise and glory and honor to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 45:13-46:24, 1 Peter 1:13-2:10, Psalms 119:33-48, Proverbs 28:11

November 23, 2019
LIFE REVOLVES AROUND WORSHIP

Readings for today: Ezekiel 45:13-46:24, 1 Peter 1:13-2:10, Psalms 119:33-48, Proverbs 28:11

God designed human life to be an act of worship. From the moment we're born until the day we die, we are hardwired to worship. Sadly, because human nature is thoroughly corrupted by sin, we will worship just about anything other than God. We'll worship celebrity. Wealth. Health. Beauty. Success. Sex. Power. You name it, we'll turn it into an object of worship. We'll bring our sacrifices. We'll sing our praises. We'll sacrifice time and money and energy and attention to appease these false gods. But they are insatiable. They are ravenous. They demand more than we can give, leaving us feeling empty and anxious and alone. They are brutal tyrants, ruthlessly and relentlessly driving us to despair and even death.

Friends, God created us to worship Him and enjoy Him forever. To live in unbroken, unending relationship with Him. This is why God pays such particular attention to the reconstruction of the Temple in Ezekiel. It's why He sets up times and seasons for worship. "Thus says the Lord God: The gate of the inner court that faces east shall be shut on the six working days, but on the Sabbath day it shall be opened, and on the day of the new moon it shall be opened...When the people of the land come before the Lord at the appointed feasts," (Ezekiel 46:1, 9) It's why He cares so much about the sacrifices. He is setting up a way of life that will directly counteract the effects of sin. He is creating a holy rhythm that will lead us continually back to Him. Follow this way and you will find spiritual renewal. Be faithful in this way and you will find true peace. Walk in this way and your hope will be restored as you get in touch with the reason why you were made in the first place.

I love how Peter describes God's vision for His people. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." (1 Peter 2:9-10) I don't know about you but I don't naturally think of myself in these terms. I don't naturally think of my church family in these terms. I don't naturally think of my brothers and sisters in Christ in the global church in these terms. Sin keeps all the focus on me. My wants. My desires. And when I let sin reign, I lose sight of who I truly am. Worship draws me back to my true self. It places God in the center of my life. Reminds me who I am and who I belong to and the price that was paid to secure my salvation. Worship floods my heart with gratitude and thanksgiving and praise for all God has done. Worship continually shapes and molds me into the image of Christ as I engage this holy rhythm over the course of a lifetime.

So here are some questions to ponder. Does your life revolve around worship of the Living God? How are you aligning your life with the holy rhythm God set up for His people? Do you spend time worshipping God each day? Do you gather with God's people for worship each week? Do you actively participate in the annual festivals like Christmas and Easter each year? Do you see these things as peripheral to your life or central? Are they easily sacrificed in favor of other opportunities or are they non-negotiable aspects to the life you are actively seeking to create for yourself and those you love?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 47-48, 1 Peter 2:11-3:7, Psalms 119:49-64, Proverbs 28:12-13

November 24, 2029

SCRIPTURES FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Ezekiel 47-48, 1 Peter 2:11-3:7, Psalms 119:49-64, Proverbs 28:12-13

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 1:1-2:23, 1 Peter 3:8-4:6, Psalms 119:65-80, Proverbs 28:14

November 25, 2019

LIVING A GODLY LIFE IN AN UNGODLY WORLD

Readings for today: Daniel 1:1-2:23, 1 Peter 3:8-4:6, Psalms 119:65-80, Proverbs 28:14

“In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect...” (1 Peter 3:15)

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

The challenges start early. As part of his training, he is presented with unclean food to eat. Right off the bat, he has a choice to make. Will he trust God or will he compromise his convictions? Here it is critical to note how Daniel responds. It will become the pattern for the rest of his life. “But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king." Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, "Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see." (Daniel 1:8-13) First and foremost, Daniel resolves to remain faithful to God’s Law. He will not eat unclean food. At the same time, he recognizes his convictions put the chief eunuch in a tough position. If Daniel and his friends refuse to eat and start to suffer physically, the eunuch is going to be punished so Daniel comes up with a plan. Essentially, let us do it God’s way for ten days and then compare us with the rest of the group. If we don’t measure up, we’ll do it your way. It’s a brilliant approach. Daniel remains faithful to God. He is able to share with the eunuch the reason for his hope. And he treats the man with gentleness and respect.

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

A few more years pass. The king grows so insecure he decides to build a monument to himself and demand everyone fall down in worship before it. It’s the height of arrogance. Daniel doesn’t appear in this story but his colleagues do. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego follow his example. Confronted with a situation which would force them to break the second commandment, they refuse to bow down in worship and instead stand faithful. The king is furious but the men answer him with grace and truth. "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we

serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." (Daniel 3:16-18) They are thrown into a furnace of fire. The king and his courtiers watch, waiting for them to be consumed. An incredible miracle happens as God Himself appears and delivers them from death. The result is again the humbling of the king. "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God." (Daniel 3:28)

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 2:24-3:30, 1 Peter 4:7-5:14, Psalms 119:81-96, Proverbs 28:15-16

November 26, 2019

HUMILITY

Readings for today: Daniel 2:24-3:30, 1 Peter 4:7-5:14, Psalms 119:81-96, Proverbs 28:15-16

There isn't much in this world a little humility wouldn't solve. Part of the problem in our current "call-out" and "cancel" culture is our arrogance. We impugn motives. We make false assumptions. We refuse to acknowledge our own blind spots. We believe we are right and others wrong. We believe we are good and others evil. We believe in the righteousness of our own cause which necessarily requires us to believe those who oppose us are unrighteous. This scorched earth approach to politics, religion, economics, race, class, even casual conversation makes it impossible to build the bridges necessary for human life to flourish in all its diversity.

Contrast this approach to what the Spirit says through the Apostle Peter in our reading for today.

"Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another...Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you." (1 Peter 4:8-10, 5:5-7) Can you imagine how much different our world would be if we embraced this way of life? Imagine how different social media would be? Imagine how different cable news would be? Imagine how different our political rhetoric would be? Imagine how different our family conversations around the dinner table would be?

Clothe yourself with humility. What does this actually mean? Humility is not thinking more of oneself than one ought or less of oneself than one ought. It's simply thinking of oneself less altogether. The more we decrease, the more others around us can increase. The more we seek to serve others in Christ's name, the more we bring blessing to those around us and the more glory we bring to Christ. The more we live as Jesus lived and love as Jesus loved, the more the world around us changes for the good. Humility is essential to this equation because we've been indoctrinated for far too long with the lie that we have to look out for number one. We have to take care of ourselves first. We must make sure our own needs get met before we seek the good of others. What a crock!

Humility is the key to unlocking the peace of God in our lives. It is only after we humble ourselves under God's mighty hand. Seeking in humility to obey His commands. Letting Him guide the course of our lives. Submitting to His will and His way that we are invited to cast all of our cares and worries and anxieties on Him. He does indeed care for us. More than we can know. More than we'll ever understand. But if we hold onto our pride, we will never truly give Him our anxieties and fears. Instead we will believe the lie that our struggles are too small for God's attention. Our fears too foolish for God to waste His time with. We will hold onto them with a white-knuckle grip all because we are too proud to admit we are weak. We are poor. We are powerless.

Friends, the truth of the matter is that we are all broken creatures. We have all been corrupted by sin. It's hardwired into our DNA at conception. It is confirmed by our thoughts, feelings, and actions ever single day. No amount of affirmation can assuage the existential guilt we all feel when we transgress the will of God. No amount of legal wrangling will grant us freedom from following God's commands. The more we run, the more anxious and depressed we become. The more we hide, the more fear takes hold. The more we distance ourselves from the One who loves us, the less secure we will feel. Stop running. Stop hiding. Stop holding your Savior at arm's length. Humble yourselves under His mighty hand and trust Him to lift you up in due time. Truly relinquish all your anxieties and fears to Him and receive the peace that passes all understanding.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 4, 2 Peter 1, Psalms 97-112, Proverbs 28:17-18

November 27, 2019
PRAY FOR OUR POLITICAL LEADERS

Readings for today: Daniel 4, 2 Peter 1, Psalms 119:97-112, Proverbs 28:17-18

One of the most controversial commands in Scripture is the command to pray for our political leaders. To honor those in power over us. To seek the good of those in authority. The Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 2:17 commands us to “honor the emperor.” The Apostle Paul commands us in 1 Timothy 2:2 to “pray for kings and others in power so we may live quiet and peaceful lives as we worship and honor God.” Proverbs teaches us that “the king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord, He turns it wherever He will.” And throughout the writings of the New Testament there is this command to be “subject to the governing authorities” (Romans 13:1, Titus 3:1-2).

Too many of us reject these commands. Instead we tear down those rulers and governing authorities. We attack their character. We question their motives. We assume the worst rather than the best. Especially if they belong to another political party. We gleefully share fake news. We willingly embrace false narratives. We delight in calling them out or piling onto every single mistake. The examples are legion from the past several administrations. Both Republicans and Democrats are guilty. As are the Libertarians, Green Party, and Socialists. No one is innocent.

Imagine what would happen if we followed Daniel’s example? If we truly sought the good of those who rule over us? If we truly sought to bless those who in authority? If we truly prayed for those who carry the weight of leadership in our nation? Imagine what would happen if we had the courage to speak truth to power - not out of a desire to tear them down but in an effort to build them up? With the hope of godly conviction? Imagine if instead of attacking those in power or engaging in power politics ourselves, Christians instead served as honest brokers? Serving presidents and politicians with no other goal than to encourage them to lead our nation well? Imagine if we could put aside our own sinful desires for photo ops in the Oval Office, influence in the corridors of power, and coercive control over the laws of our country?

Daniel was given a powerful position within Babylonian society. He had the ear of the king. He was known for his wisdom and godly character. He never sought personal gain. Never used political maneuvering for his own personal benefit. Never sought power or privilege or higher status. His allegiance was to a much higher authority. He lived for God alone and this made his position unassailable. When his political enemies came after him, they found nothing to pin on him. They dug up no dirt. They found no one who would speak against Daniel. Daniel’s deep faith led to true freedom. He was free to speak God’s truth to Nebuchadnezzar. Free to confront him on his pride and arrogance. Free to give him the bad news about the meaning of his dreams. Daniel was free to call Nebuchadnezzar to repent which he eventually did.

“King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you! It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me. How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation...At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?...Now I, Nebuchadnezzar,

praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.” (Daniel 4:1-3, 34-35, 37)

Where did Daniel find such freedom? Prayer. He humbly presented himself before the Lord multiple times a day. He came before the Lord with praise. He confessed his sins. He lifted up his needs and the needs of his people. And I am convinced Daniel prayed fervently for the kings he served like Nebuchadnezzar. Sometimes it is tempting to think we have it bad in our country. To think our leaders have reached a level of corruption that places them beyond the grace of God. Nothing could be further from the truth! Nebuchadnezzar was one of the world’s great tyrants. When Peter and Paul talked about honoring and praying for the emperor, they were talking about Nero of Rome. Christians throughout the centuries and throughout the world today suffer under the harshest of regimes and still they pray for their leaders. Can we do any less?

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 5, 2 Peter 2, Psalms 119:113-128, Proverbs 28:19-20

November 28, 2019
THANKSGIVING

Readings for today: Daniel 5, 2 Peter 2, Psalms 119:113-128, Proverbs 28:19-20

“You are my hiding place and my shield; I hope in your word.” (Psalms 119:114)

I am thankful this morning. Thankful for a family I love. Great friendships I treasure. Work that is meaningful and significant. A church family who loves and pursues Jesus. Freedom won for me at great sacrifice by those who serve in our Armed Forces. My life protected on so many levels by our first responders. A warm home. Plenty of food on my table. There is frankly very little want or need in my life.

Beyond and above all of that is a deep sense of gratitude for all God has done for me. He pursued me when I was lost and lonely. He lifted me in His arms and carried me through the darkest times of my life. He rejoiced with me at each of life’s special celebrations. My wedding day. The birth of each of my children. My graduation from seminary and my ordination to the ministry. He has been my hiding place when I am scared. He has been my shield when I felt under attack. He has been faithful to walk with me through every deep valley and summit every high mountain along the way.

I am thankful my God loved me so much He sent His one and only begotten Son to save me from my sin. I am thankful God loved this broken world so much He left heaven, threw Himself on the wheel of history, broke his own body in order to make her whole. I am thankful the Word became flesh and blood and made His dwelling among us. I am thankful God bridged the gulf Adam created between heaven and earth through his sin so that the door might be open and we find our way home. I am thankful God was willing to lay down His life for us. Sacrificing the glory of heaven for the humiliation of earth. Sacrificing the splendor of heaven for the dullness of earth. Sacrificing the sweet communion of heaven for the discord of earth. God gave up so much to save us. As the old hymn says so beautifully, “Amazing love! How can it be that Thou my God shouldst die for me?”

It is so easy to focus on all the ungodliness in our world. The blasphemies committed in Daniel 5 or referenced in 2 Peter 3. But today is a day of thankfulness. A day of gratitude. A day to focus not on how far we fall short but on how far God is willing to go to save! My prayer for you is that your day would be filled with joy and laughter. Fellowship and friendship. Fun and games. Even if it is a hard day because you’ve lost someone you love. Or a tense day because of the relational strain in your family. Or a lonely day because you are separated from those closest to you. I pray even in these spaces that you experience the grace and mercy of God. That you find your heart strangely warmed by His presence. God is with us. This is the heart of the gospel. So we give thanks.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 6, 2 Peter 3, Psalms 119:129-152, Proverbs 28:21-22

November 29, 2019
HOW LONG O LORD?

Readings for today: Daniel 6, 2 Peter 3, Psalms 119:129-152, Proverbs 28:21-22

I struggle to find words as an infant-sized casket is lowered into the ground. The sobs of the parents ring in my ears. There are stunned and bewildered looks on the faces of those who gather for support. How long O Lord? How long?

I sit at the bedside of a woman dying from cancer. Her body ravaged by chemo and radiation. Her husband stands by her side weeping. Her children and grandchildren struggling to understand how this could happen so fast. So soon. How long O Lord? How long?

I listen to a friend of mine share about the injustices he has faced. His only crime is the color of his skin. Profiled. Pulled over. Humiliated in front of his children. He is angry. He shakes his fist in frustration at a society that simply cannot get beyond its racist past. How long O Lord? How long?

I pray with a family who's been in country for over a decade. They work hard. They've done everything right. Their visa's been renewed year after year. But because immigration has become a political football, they are about to lose everything. Their home. Their community. They anticipate being denied access to the US and having to start all over again back in a country they no longer consider home. How long O Lord? How long?

I visit a remote village in Africa. The rains are delayed this year. Drought sweeps the region. Livestock are dying. Crops are failing. Children are suffering. Helpless and hopeless, the men and women of the village look to me but I cannot save them. How long O Lord? How long?

I often find myself asking God, "Why the delay?" "What are you waiting for?" "Why do you not end the suffering in our world?" And God answers me from His Word. "But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed." (2 Peter 3:8-10) Yes, this world is full of suffering. Yes, this world is full of pain. Yes, this world is full of heartbreak. Evil runs rampant. Sin corrupts all it touches. Creation groans under the strain. This is not how things should be. This is not what God wanted. This was never God's plan.

The world was designed to flourish and thrive under the care and protection of a high priest God made in His image. The world was designed to house the glory of God as human beings bore His image out to all creation. The world was designed to be cultivated and nourished by the work of our hands. But we abandoned our calling. We abdicated our position. We relinquished our divinely-appointed role. Sin entered the world and the natural consequence for sin is death.

So why doesn't God act? Why doesn't God put an end to this world? Think about what you're asking. On the great Day of the Lord, the heavens will pass away with a roar. Heavenly bodies will burn up and dissolve. Old things will pass away to make room for the new. Those image-bearers who do not repent. Who have yet to bow the knee to Christ. Who refuse to acknowledge Jesus as Lord will be doomed to an eternity apart from God. This is why God is slow to act. He is not slow because He is sadistic. He is

slow because He is patient. Time doesn't pass for Him like it does for us. He is waiting. Waiting patiently for all to repent. Waiting patiently for all to come to faith. And He is at work among us, drawing us to Himself. He holds the suffering close. He is with those who walk through the valley of the shadow of death. He is near to the broken-hearted and crushed in spirit.

So come to Him if you are weary. Come to Him if you are heavy laden. Come to Him if you are weighed down by the stresses and cares and worries of this world. Come and find rest for your soul.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 7, 1 John 1, Psalms 119:153-176, Proverbs 28:23-24

November 30, 2019
TRANSPARENCY

Readings for today: Daniel 7, 1 John 1, Psalms 119:153-176, Proverbs 28:23-24

It's the hidden things that kill us. The stuff we bury deep inside. The secrets we keep. Yesterday, I saw the movie, *It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, which tells the story of Mr. Rogers and his friendship with a reporter named Lloyd. Lloyd is a troubled man. He is filled with all kinds of pain. Abandoned by his father as a boy, he watched as his mother died in agony. He's never forgiven his father. Never forgotten his betrayal. And the anger he feels is poisoning his soul. He is cynical. He is bitter. And these unprocessed feelings warp his view of the world. Then he meets Mr. Rogers. Mr. Rogers is transparent. He is who he is whether on set or on the street. He has nothing to hide. As 1 John says so well, "He walks in the light."

I know so many Lloyd's. I've talked with them in my office. Prayed with them after worship. Met them for coffee at Fika. They've shared with me a bit of their darkness. Opened up to me about their pain. Confided in me their heartbreaks. So much of their lives are lived in fear of what might happen should they be exposed. They walk in darkness. I know this journey well. I too have walked in darkness. I too wander there every now and again. I am not immune. There are things I've done that I'm ashamed of. There are things I've said I wish I could take back. There are people I've hurt through my carelessness and callousness. And it is so tempting to try and move on. To stuff my emotions down deep inside and pretend I'm okay. But just like Lloyd, those things have a way of rising to the surface. Left unchecked, they begin to infect all we say and do. This is why we seem to repeat the same mistakes over and over again.

John points us to a different way. "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." (1 John 1:5-10) For far too long I read "light" and "darkness" in this passage as right and wrong. Good and evil. And I despaired. For I do not walk in the light as I should and so I would beat myself up over and over again. But now I think I understand John better. He's not suggesting we live a life of perfection before God but a life of transparency. We walk in the light. Nothing hidden. Nothing held back. Nothing secret. We expose all that we are to the light of God's presence. As we walk transparently before Him, we have fellowship with one another. True, deep, rich, authentic fellowship. Intimate relationships. Spiritual friendships. This is the natural byproduct of a life lived in the light. Walking transparently is not easy. It is scary. It is risky. We will constantly feel exposed and under threat. But we persevere knowing the blood of Jesus is sufficient to cover all our sin. We endure trusting God to be faithful and just to forgive us. We push on knowing we are being continuously cleansed from all unrighteousness.

What secrets are you keeping? What parts of your life do you keep hidden even from those you love? Where have you embraced darkness out of fear of walking in the light? Confess your sins to God. Bring those things transparently before Him. Let the promise of His forgiveness wash over you. Let His Spirit cleanse you. Let His grace heal and strengthen you so that you may walk transparently before those you love. Share your deepest, darkest secrets with those closest to you. To be loved for who you are not just the image you project is source of true freedom.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 8, 1 John 2:1-17, Psalms 120, Proverbs 28:25-26