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September 1, 2020
ROCK BOTTOM

Readings for today: [Lamentations 3:37-5:22](#)

I remember hitting rock bottom. It was August 1992. I had just finished my first summer after my first year of college. Things were not good. I had bombed my first year of school. Too much drinking. Skipped too much class. I had been in Maine all summer coaching lacrosse and threw myself into the “camp counselor” lifestyle which involved a lot of drinking and casual sex. Several nights, I woke up passed out at the bar where we partied. I was about as far from God as can be. I came back in a dark place. Depressed. Empty inside. Ashamed of the person I was becoming. My whole life was in a tailspin and I could feel every rotation.

There is only one place to go when you hit rock bottom. You turn to God. Within the first week or so of being on campus again at college, a friend of mine invited me to a student ministry. I figured I had nothing to lose. I didn’t realize it at the time but my life changed the moment I walked in those doors. God met me there in a powerful way. Drew me in. Gave me new life. New hope. A sense of joy. I looked around and saw so many students who seemed to have something I did not. I joined a small group Bible study to find out how to get it. Those men loved me. Blessed me. Put up with my foolishness. I remember asking them to hold me accountable to only drinking one beer an hour at the parties I attended. I failed almost every week but they stuck with me. My life was still not going well. I was still drinking far too much. Still missing too much class. But there was something about this group of guys. Spending time with them became my lifeline. The highlight of my week. Going to Late Nite - our student ministry fellowship - was something I looked forward to. It was a bright spot in an otherwise dark time for me.

A few months went by. I found myself walking alone on the way to the Student Center. Right by the parking garage. I can still picture exactly where I stopped and looked up. A realization hit me that day. Looking back, I can see how it had been growing all semester. This sense that God was very real. The young men I studied the Bible with believed Jesus wasn’t just some old dusty historical figure they admired. They actually believed He was alive and suddenly I realized I did too. And if that were true then everything in my life needed to change.

Lamentations is an account of what happens when we hit rock bottom. It’s ugly. Especially when we’re watching the fall of a nation. I’ve seen what happens when governments fall. When political unrest and instability reigns. I’ve seen the effects of famine, drought, and starvation. I’ve witnessed what happens when people lose all hope of ever escaping poverty. I’ve been approached by women selling their babies in the streets. I’ve seen disease ravage bodies because they had no access to healthcare. I’ve held the hands of the dying and prayed over them as they pass from this brutal world. When I read Lamentations and the accounts of the ash heaps, women boiling their children for food, people wandering listless in the streets, and those wishing for a swift end at the edge of the sword; I think of some of the places I’ve been. This is actually happening today in places like Syria, Yemen, and Somalia. The people in these places suffer tremendously and in their suffering, they look to God. They beg for help. They ask Him to intervene.

The good news is God often does through the efforts of His people. Through organizations like World Relief, World Vision, and International Justice Mission who intentionally go to the front lines of these conflict zones to offer what they can. From the opening pages of Genesis, God had determined to bring blessing to this world through the creatures He made in His image. To them He gave dominion and

authority over all He had made. To them He gave power and responsibility to care for all He had made. To them He gave the command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. And now that call comes to us. What will we do with it? How will we come alongside the suffering? Will we be the ones God uses to lift them up? This is the truth we are forced to confront over and over again. Whenever the question is raised, "Why does God allow such suffering?" We have to look in the mirror and own the fact that we are the ones who created these conditions. We are the ones who tolerate the inequalities that exist in our world. We are the ones who spend our lives building up riches and resources while so many around the world go without. The real question. The honest question. The question we don't want to face is not..."Why does God allow such suffering?" That's passing the buck. Playing the same blame game Adam and Eve began way back in the Garden. No, the real question is "Why do WE allow such suffering?" We who have the means and the technology and the resources. Why do we continue to withhold these things from those who need them most?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 1-4

September 2, 2020
APOCALYPSE

Readings for the day: [Ezekiel 1-4](#)

Welcome to Ezekiel and some of the strangest writings of the Old Testament! The next several weeks will be confusing if it's your first time through so let me give you a few tools to help you navigate this book. Let's begin with some history on Ezekiel himself. Ezekiel was born into a priestly family, most likely during the reign of King Josiah in Judah. You will remember King Josiah was one of the faithful kings of Judah and dedicated his reign to cleansing the land of idols and restoring the true worship of Yahweh. He was married but his wife died just prior to the siege of Jerusalem in 587 BC. He was taken into exile along with many of the leaders and influential people of Judah and resettled in Babylon. There it appears he held an important leadership position among the exiles even before receiving his call to be a prophet.

What sets apart the leadership of Ezekiel are the strange visions he received from the Lord. Like Daniel and the Apostle John, he is given the gift of being able to see beyond the veil of this world into the next. But what he sees is overwhelming. Confusing. It doesn't make a lot of sense to us 21st century readers. This is a style of writing known as "apocalyptic." Not unique to the Bible, it has parallels in a lot of ancient near east literature. It has several features you will need to keep in mind as you read.

Revelation - The very word, "apokalypsis" in the Greek means "revelation" or "disclosure." Apocalyptic literature is marked by a direct revelation from God to a seer or prophet, usually in visions or dreams, who then writes down what he sees.

Mystery - The meaning of the visions are often shrouded in mystery. They might refer to past, current, or future events. They may include strange images from the world beyond. While the seer or prophet may write them down in great detail, deciphering them is a significant challenge.

Symbolism - The visions are rife with symbols drawn from nature, ancient near east mythology, astral phenomena, etc. These symbols are used by the seer or prophet to make sense of what he sees and could represent coded language in order to pass imperial censors who may be screening their correspondence.

Resistance Literature - Because the prophet is typically writing from an "exilic" perspective where he and his people live under oppression, his focus is on the future rather than the present. The visions are meant to provide hope to a people who are suffering.

God is sovereign - The overarching message of the apocalyptic genre in the Bible is that God reigns. He is supreme. He will judge the nations. He will have the final victory. Despite their present conditions, God's people are to place their trust in Him.

Ezekiel sees a vision. God appears to him in all His glory and splendor. Living creatures with strange faces. Wheels heading in every direction. High winds. Burning coals of fire. And above it all a throne where a majestic figure sits. It's so overwhelming that Ezekiel sits speechless for seven straight days.

What is the content of the revelation Ezekiel receives? His calling to be a prophet. Ezekiel is called to be a "watchman" for Israel. He will speak God's Word to His people. He will embody God's messages through his actions. He will become the vessel through which God will make known His will. This will

not be an easy call. Serving God as His prophet never is! There is always a cost! The people will resist him. The people will reject his message. The people may even beat and attack him. But Ezekiel's job is simply to be faithful. To sound the trumpet. To give fair warning. To confront God's people on their sin.

And what will the confrontation look like? This strange scene where Ezekiel lays on his side for 390 days and 40 days respectively to atone for the sins of each kingdom. The 390 days represents the 390 years between the apostasy of Jeroboam of the northern kingdom of Israel when he set up idols for his people to worship and the Babylonian Captivity that Ezekiel is now experiencing. (975-c. 583 BC) The forty days represents the final years of apostasy in the southern kingdom of Judah. Taken together, the 430 years represented matches the number of years Israel was enslaved in Egypt before the Exodus, meaning the key to their future hope lies in the faithfulness God has shown them in the past. God will repeat what He has done and deliver them again from slavery but only after they have returned to Him with all their hearts.

What does any of this have to do with us? Wise and discerning Christians will see the similarities between the apostasy/exile of Israel and the reality of our own apostasy/exile in the church. We too have a need for God to raise up faithful "watchmen and women" who will proclaim the Word of God with boldness. Prophets who will speak God's truth regardless of how it is received. Men and women who understand their first call is to please Christ rather than people. This is just as hard for us today as it was for Ezekiel back then. And it is the job of every Christian. The call of every single person who claims to follow Jesus. We are the ones whom God has sent! We are the vessels He has chosen to use for His purposes!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 5-8

September 3, 2020
RETURN TO GOD

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 5-8](#)

Today's reading is as brutal as they come. Violence. Disease. Famine. Destruction. Pain. Suffering. God delivering His people over to judgment. It is hard to read. Harder still to try and picture. But the hardest part is to accept is that this is all from God. All a part of His plan. It raises some extremely difficult questions. How can this be the same God who promised compassion and steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love Him? How can this be the same God who will later reveal Himself fully and completely in Jesus Christ? How can this God of wrath be the same God of love? Is this God bipolar? Manic? Schizophrenic? Does He have rage issues? Can He be trusted? Is such a God even worthy of our love?

These are all important questions to ponder but they also ultimately miss the point. God is God. He has made known His will. He has established His covenant. He has made clear His expectations. From the beginning, He has held nothing back. Nothing hidden. Nothing secret. He created us to fulfill His purposes. He is the Potter. We are the clay. Our problem is that we keep forgetting our place. We keep rejecting our role. We refuse to acknowledge His Lordship over our lives. Starting with Adam and Eve, we keep asserting our independence. We keep trying to be our own gods. Do things our own way. Worship as we please. Do things as we choose. And we forget the One we were created to serve. We forget the One we were created to please. We forget God is God and we are not.

We cannot say we haven't been warned. God is more patient with us than we deserve. He forbears for generations as the sin piles up. He continues to reach out in love only to have the door slammed in His face. He continues to show us grace though we deserve judgment. He continues to be faithful though we ignore Him and walk away. There are consequences to such actions. The apostle Paul talks about them in Romans 1, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men..." And how does that wrath manifest itself according to Paul? God simply withdraws His hand. He "gives us over" to the lusts of our hearts. The lust of our eyes. The pride and arrogance of our lives. And the results are ugly. Harsh. Tragic. Horrifying. Human beings, left unchecked, are brutal creatures. It was Robert Burns who first coined the phrase, "Man's inhumanity to man" in a poem he wrote in 1787 and recent events in our own country only serve to confirm his analysis of the human condition. We are capable of unfathomable evil. We are capable of the most brutal violence. We are capable of the most horrifying, dehumanizing behavior. And if we're totally honest, we all know this to be true. Given the right conditions, all of us are capable of just about anything. (See the infamous "Stanford Prison Experiment" of 1971.)

How should a just and holy God respond? Righteous judgment. Our sin offends God on a level we simply cannot understand. Listen to how Ezekiel describes how God feels, "Then those of you who escape will remember me among the nations where they are carried captive, how I have been broken over their whoring heart that has departed from me and over their eyes that go whoring after their idols." (Ezekiel 6:9) God takes our sin seriously. Our problem is we don't take it seriously enough. We gloss it over. We make excuses. We rationalize our behavior. We justify our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. We foolishly believe we are somehow special and will escape judgment. We presume upon our relationship with God. We are just like Israel who believed they were "immune" because they were God's chosen people.

But God will not be mocked. He vents His fury without mercy. "Thus shall my anger spend itself, and I will vent my fury upon them and satisfy myself. And they shall know that I am the Lord—that I have spoken in my jealousy—when I spend my fury upon them." (Ezekiel 5:13) It is scary. It is frightening. It makes us tremble. And if we aren't careful we will miss what God is trying to do. In our fear, we will focus yet again on all the wrong things. God's judgment is NOT an end in itself! It points beyond itself to something far greater! Far more important!

"That they may know I am the Lord." Over and over again we read this refrain. God using judgment to cleanse His people. To purify. To refine. He disciplines us in His love. He confronts the evil of our hearts. He forces us to come face to face with the depth of our sin and degradation. The utter futility of our idolatry. The full measure of our rebellion. Yes, it is harsh but it is also true. It is just. It is fair. It is right. It is good. And it is ultimately so we may return in humility to the Lord. We must be broken. Our hardened hearts must be crushed. Our stiff necks bent. God will indeed force us to our knees through judgment so we may again experience the joy of being in right relationship with Him. This is the point of exile. This is the point of suffering. God wants His people back. And He will not relent until we return to Him.

It's a sobering reality. Especially for us Christians. To think of all that Christ endured as the Father poured His wrath out on His Son. To consider all Christ went through as he experienced the depths of hell and God-forsakenness. He took on the full weight of human sin. As terrifying as the judgment is in Ezekiel, it pales in comparison to the judgment Christ suffered on the Cross. Reading these words through the prism of the Cross should make us appreciate more and more the wonder of Christ's sacrifice for us. We should find ourselves marveling at the great love of God who would take our place. Bring judgment on Himself. Freely lay down His life in order to save us from our sin. Amazing love! How can it be that Thou my God wouldst die for me?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 9-12

September 4, 2020
THE GLORY OF THE LORD

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 9-12](#)

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

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

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

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

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

senses. The father runs to him. Embraces him. Gives him a robe to wear and places the signet ring back on his finger. He is home. He is one of the family again.

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

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

Friends, God's glory doesn't need a Temple. A house made with human hands. A sanctuary covered in gold. The Bible declares that we are temples of the Holy Spirit! Our hearts have become the residence of God Himself! This is why Ezekiel declares, "And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God." (Ezekiel 11:19-20) Furthermore, it's why the Apostle Paul will later declare, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16) Because God's Spirit has taken up residence in our hearts, we ourselves are "being transformed into the Christ's image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18) Amazing! The great news of the gospel is that God's glory now lives in us!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 13-16

September 7, 2020
IS GOD JUST?

Readings for the day: [Ezekiel 17-20](#)

Today's reading poses a very important question. One we all ask. One that seems almost hardwired into our souls. Is God just? God's people have been asking this question for centuries. They look at their history. They look at their circumstances. They ponder their suffering and struggle and strife. And because of the difficulties they face in their lives, they wonder how God could allow such things to happen. They wonder how a good God could allow evil to flourish. They wonder how a loving God could stand by and watch His people endure such pain. They wonder how a gracious God could be so demanding.

I hear these questions all the time. "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.'" (Ezekiel 18:25) From the very beginning, we've been avoiding the responsibilities that come with being made in God's image and being given a mandate to care for all creation. We keep trying to find someone to blame for all our problems. Rather than looking at ourselves and the depth of human depravity, we look to God and look to blame-shift. We try to escape the natural consequences of our selfish behavior by pretending that somehow the issue is God's... "He made me this way", "He set up the world like this", "He is the one who allows evil to flourish..." All the while, we refuse to face the truth about the man or woman we see in the mirror.

God will have none of it. "Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it; for the injustice that he has done he shall die. Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life. Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?" (Ezekiel 18:25-29) God makes it very clear that He will not allow us to skirt our responsibilities. Our sin is the root of the evil we see in the world. Our rebellion is the reason for our difficult circumstances. Our refusal to follow the ways of God is why we face such suffering and hardship with so little hope. It is not God's arm that is shortened or God's strength that has failed or God's justice that has let them down. The failure is their own.

Thankfully, God is merciful. He is gracious. He loves us despite our sin. Listen to His precious words from Ezekiel 18 and be encouraged. "Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die." Your soul is God's. Whether you believe or disbelieve. Whether you are good or evil. Whether you feel worthy or unworthy. Your soul is God's. He holds you in His hand. "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." You are responsible for you. You are not at the mercy of your family's dysfunction or broken history. You are not simply the product of your genetic makeup. If you are a Christian, you are a rational, spiritual creature who is endowed by Christ with His Spirit to make godly choices. "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" God doesn't delight in your pain. God is not immune to your suffering. God does not derive a sadistic pleasure from the death of anyone, including the wicked. He loves everyone He made in His image and desires all to be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin.

Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live." What God desires is NOT perfection but repentance. Humility rather than pride. A broken and contrite heart, God will never despise.

Friends, the secret to a life lived well before God has EVERYTHING to do with submission. Surrender. An honest, transparent acknowledgment of your sin. We come to the Cross on our knees. The ground is level. All are equally guilty in His sight and yet all are equally made righteous by the death of His Son. Nothing about you is left untouched. Unhealed. Unchanged. God will save to the uttermost those who turn to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 21-24

September 8, 2020
PART OF A LARGER STORY

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 21-24](#)

One of the biggest challenges we have to overcome...especially when we read the Old Testament...is our tendency to see ourselves as neutral, third-party observers. We read the words and then decide if we believe them to be true or not. We think of ourselves as dispassionate, rational, and objective. We stand outside the biblical story. We take the parts we like and we jettison the parts we don't like. We believe we have options. We believe we get to determine what's true for us. And we cling on to those passages that help us understand how we are to be saved. It's a highly individualistic, highly rationalistic, thoroughly Western, uniquely Protestant approach to engaging the Bible. And it would have been utterly foreign to the biblical writers themselves.

Ezekiel sees himself as part of one long continuous story that harkens all the way back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He sees himself playing a very minor role in the grand sweep of God's epic tale of deliverance and salvation. He understood himself to be caught up in this story. His life as one thread in a much larger tapestry. His job as a Jewish man, much less a prophet of God, was to find his place in this story. To play his part. To do the work his God had called him to do. So as he surveys the landscape of what's happening around him. As he looks to the heavens and charts the courses of the stars or ponders the rise and fall of the great empires around the Ancient Near East or considers the desperate straits of his own people; he interprets all of these things from a theological perspective. He tries to discern God's hand in all that's taking place. Tragically, this includes the death of his own wife.

"Son of man, behold, I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke; yet you shall not mourn or weep, nor shall your tears run down." (Ezekiel 24:16) I cannot imagine the pain Ezekiel must feel at the loss of his beloved. We do not know much about their relationship but the fact that God Himself calls her the "delight" of Ezekiel's eyes probably says much. Their love must have been strong. Their intimacy deep. And yet when she passes, Ezekiel is not allowed to mourn. This may strike us as a little weird but for Ezekiel's contemporaries it would have been shocking. Jewish culture is highly expressive when it comes to grief. People in those days would literally hire professional mourners to weep and wail alongside those who had lost loved ones so they wouldn't feel ashamed to express their pain and heartbreak. Funerals would last for days and involve the whole community. Food would be eaten. Stories shared. Tears cried. It was a powerful, visceral ritual designed to help those who had lost loved ones process their grief. But Ezekiel is denied this experience. Why?

Why would God treat his prophet in this way? How could Ezekiel see God's hand in all this? What in the world made Ezekiel think that God was calling him NOT to grieve! NOT to mourn! NOT to weep? Again, it comes back to how Ezekiel understood himself. He lives within a much larger story that is unfolding over the centuries. God making Himself known to His people. God walking alongside His people. God relating to His people. Ezekiel understands all of life to be lived under the sovereign Lordship of Yahweh. Not just in the abstract but in the everyday. Ezekiel believed God was at work in every moment of his life. Every experience. Every success. Every failure. Every joy. Every pain. God ruled over it all and God was using it all for His purposes. So when his wife dies, Ezekiel somehow understands this to be yet another sign from God to His people. Ezekiel's own life. Ezekiel's own heartbreak will be used to demonstrate the depth of God's heartbreak and grief over the sins of His people. "Thus shall Ezekiel be to you a sign; according to all that he has done you shall do. When this comes, then you will know that I am the Lord God." (Ezekiel 24:24)

I know this sounds very strange to our ears and yet it is the key to understanding the Bible. It is the key to understanding why the people in the Bible did the things they did. It is the key to understanding why Noah built an ark. Sarah's laughter. Abraham going up a mountain to sacrifice his son. Moses confronting Pharaoh. Joshua renewing the covenant. Deborah's song. Samuel hearing God's voice. David dancing before the ark. The religious reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah. The tears of Jeremiah. All of these great men and women believed their lives were not their own. They believed they were instruments in God's hands to use as He saw fit for His own purposes and glory. They had no identity outside of God. No independent existence apart from Him. They had no story to call their own. No, their lives were completely wrapped up in the much larger story God was telling about deliverance and salvation and redemption and final restoration! That's why Ezekiel could look at the death of his wife through a theological lens, even seeing it as yet another prophetic sign for God's people.

Imagine how your perspective on life would change if you saw the world through Ezekiel's eyes! Imagine seeing God's hand at work in every instance. Every encounter. Every experience good or bad. Imagine seeing God's purpose behind every success or failure. Every joy or sorrow. Every moment of every day. Imagine it was God speaking to you through every conversation. God teaching you and humbling you through every trial and hardship. Imagine God showing you His faithfulness as He gives you far more than you can handle. This, friends, is one of the deep and most profound messages running from Genesis to Revelation. God attempting to give us His eternal perspective. God trying to help see things from His point of view. From the vantage point of God's eternal kingdom, everything changes. The rise and fall of nations. The 24 news cycle. The triumphs and tragedies of life. The ordinary and mundane. All of it transformed. Impregnated with eternal significance -or insignificance as it were - in God's hands.

If only Ezekiel were alive today! I think he'd say, "Don't weep for me. Weep for the world. Weep for the lack of faith. The pervasiveness of sin. The rise of evil. The brokenness of God's people. Save your tears for the coming judgment of God."

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 25-28

September 9, 2020

VANITY: THE DEVIL'S FAVORITE SIN

Readings for today: Ezekiel 25-28

“Vanity, definitely my favorite sin.” - Satan

This line comes at the end of a movie called, *The Devil's Advocate*, where Satan (played by Al Pacino) attempts to manipulate and coerce a young lawyer (played by Keanu Reeves) into doing his bidding. Initially, it looks like the lawyer will compromise his integrity for a future filled with wealth and power and privilege. In fact, most of the movie teases out this scenario. But in the end, Reeves successfully resists one temptation only to potentially fall to another. His sacrificial commitment to his ideals makes him a hero in the eyes of the people which in turn makes him just as susceptible to the sin of vanity than if he had taken the compromise in the first place.

Pride is definitely the most slippery of sins and represents the greatest weapon in Satan's arsenal. He uses it to corrupt rich and poor alike. He uses it to attack both the powerful and the powerless. He knows we are all equally vulnerable when it comes to this particular sin. How does he know? Because he was the first to fall prey to it. “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) Yes, this passage is referring to the king of Tyre but as with a lot of prophetic literature, such passages are layered with many different meanings. In this particular case, God is revealing to his prophet what took place way back before the beginning of time. There, in the heavenly realm, when all was good and right and beautiful, God anointed a heavenly being with great power and authority. He placed him in the Garden of Eden and covered him with precious stones. He made him guardian over all He had made. But this being became prideful. He rose up against God. He abandoned his place and sought to take God's throne himself. So God exiled Satan. Threw him from the heavens. Cast him out of his presence.

Satan uses pride to manipulate and control human beings. He uses it to corrupt even the most pure among us. He uses it to destroy marriages as one spouse starts to compete over and against the other. He uses it to destroy business partnerships as one party starts to believe they deserve more than the other. He uses it against nations, convincing them of their own exceptionalism. He uses it to destroy churches, as God's people start to look down on each other as “less spiritual” than others. I've seen it happen so many times it's almost become cliché.

How does one guard one's heart against the sin of pride? By keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. By never taking our eyes off of Him and the great sacrifice He made on the cross for us. By pondering and prayerfully reflecting on the Cross, we are constantly reminded of our great need for Christ and the sheer poverty of our own spiritual condition. We are reminded that every good and perfect gift comes from God and none it is ours to claim for ourselves. We are far less likely to take credit for the good things that happen in our lives and instead, are far more likely to credit God for what He has done. We walk with open hands rather than clenched fists and we let the Lord direct our steps. We understand that entered this world with nothing and will exit with the same. All of our achievements and accomplishments in this world simply cannot be compared to the glory God will one day reveal in us. And so we humble ourselves before the Lord as a continual act of worship.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 29-32

September 10, 2020
MORE ON PRIDE...

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 29-32](#)

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. "All this is in order that no trees by the waters may grow to towering height or set their tops among the clouds, and that no trees that drink water may reach up to them in height. For they are all given over to death, to the world below, among the children of man, with those who go down to the pit...Whom are you thus like in glory and in greatness among the trees of Eden? You shall be brought down with the trees of Eden to the world below. You shall lie among the uncircumcised, with those who are slain by the sword." (Ezekiel 31:14, 18)

A couple of years ago, during a time of prayer, the Lord spoke to my heart. 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 33-36

September 11, 2020
GOD'S WATCHMAN

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 33-36](#)

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

Ezekiel was a faithful prophet. He understood his call from the Lord clearly. He was to speak God's Word to God's people. Only God's Word. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else. He was to speak God's Word as boldly and clearly as possible. He was to speak with full conviction and hold nothing back. In so doing, he is creating the conditions whereby God's people might respond in repentance and humility. It's important to note that the watchman is not responsible for the results. They are only responsible for the warning they provide. So Ezekiel's success or failure in ministry doesn't ride on how the people respond. Those who listen to his words will be saved. Those who reject his words will be destroyed. Ezekiel will only be held responsible to speak. Truthfully. Honestly. Openly. Transparently. "So you, son of man, I have made 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, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul." (Ezekiel 33:7-9)

At the same time, I imagine Ezekiel loves his people. All good pastors do. We live and die with the decisions we watch people make. We grieve when they fail to turn from sin. We rejoiced when we see true life change. We get discouraged when we see spiritual complacency. We get excited when we see someone finally hit rock bottom and turn to Jesus. So the burden of the watchman is a heavy one. And I imagine Ezekiel felt this weight keenly. Especially as he watches God's people respond to the Word of God preached. Some rest in their own self-righteousness. Others turn from their wickedness. The ups and downs of ministry are reflected in these words from Ezekiel 33, "The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness, and the righteous shall not be able to live by his righteousness when he sins. Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die. Again, though I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he shall surely live. "Yet your people say, 'The way of the Lord is not just,' when it is their own way that is not just. When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it. And when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by this. Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to his ways." (Ezekiel 33:12-20)

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

I think about all I see happening in our world today. There is such a lack of compassion and empathy and love towards those who are different than us. The differences may be ethnic. The differences may be economic. The differences may be political. The differences may be social. No matter where the differences lie, we seem to have so little tolerance for one another. Our hearts are extremely hard towards those who are not like us. And if we let our hearts continue to harden, we end up expressing only anger and hate both of which are poison to the soul. Sure, we may have all sorts of justifications as to why we treat people so poorly. We may have all kinds of reasons why we feel justified in attacking a person's character or questioning their motives or spreading gossip, rumors, and lies. But at the end of the day, we have to acknowledge that such rationalizations are self-serving at best and do not further the cause of Christ. It is only when we are willing to deal first with the log in our own eye that we will be able to see clearly the speck in our brother's eye. Without us first addressing our own sin, we can never address the sins of our culture, our nation, or our world.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 37-40

September 12, 2020
CAN DRY BONES LIVE?

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 37-40](#)

I have spent time in valleys full of dry bones. It may be a loveless marriage. It may be a broken family system. It may be a church that has lost any sense of mission beyond itself. It could be a community where tax revenues are declining and schools are shuttering and all hope seems lost. Walking into such valleys is hard. You can feel the crunch of the bones beneath your feet. You can hear the wind as it whistles through the graveyard. You can feel the presence of death all around. There is no joy in such places. There is only hopelessness and despair. Perhaps that's why I love this particular text from Ezekiel so much.

“The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” I cannot tell you how many times God has asked me this question. Can these bones live? Can this marriage be restored? Can this church be renewed? Can this community come back from the brink? Can our nation be saved? Initially, I would find myself telling God all the reasons why such things were impossible. I had all my human excuses for why we should simply cut bait and move on. But I've been at this long enough now to realize how little I know so I've started answering along with Ezekiel, “O Lord God, only you know.”

“Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord.” It's a powerful thing God calls us to do. To declare hope in the face of hopelessness. To declare joy in the midst of sadness and mourning. To declare love when it feels like all love has been lost once and for all. To walk by faith in the midst of the mess we've made of our lives and our churches and our society, trusting God make the dry bones live again.

“So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them.” The first step is always obedience. To believe. To prophesy as God commands. To listen for the rattling. To watch as God begins to bring the dry bones together. To identify the muscles and sinews and skin as it appears. These are the first signs of hope. They are like the first buds in the spring. They signal something is about to happen. Someone is still at work. Despite what appears to be dead, there is life being renewed and restored. And yet, there is still something missing.

“Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.” It is the Spirit of God that breathes life into our weary souls. It is the Spirit of God that breathes love into loveless marriages. It is the Spirit of God who revives dying churches. It is the Spirit of God that blows fresh through struggling communities. It is the Spirit of God that restores a nation. The Spirit comes from the four winds. It blows across the earth. It comes from

the most unlikely of places and at the most unexpected of times. Note our role in all of this. It's simply to pray. To prophesy. To ask the Lord to pour out His Spirit on His people.

“Then he said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord.” (Ezekiel 37:1-14)

I don't know about you but I long for the day when the dry bones of our nation will rise once again. I long for the day when the dry bones of so many depressed and hurting communities across our country will rise again. I long for the day when the dry bones of so many of our churches will rise or the dry bones of so many marriages and families will rise. And when I look around at the bones that surround me, I often feel overwhelmed. But then I remember, my job is not to make the bones rise or even make the bones come back together. My job is simply to believe. To pray. To prophesy. To proclaim God's Truth and point people to the One who holds the power to raise even the dead back to life!

September 14, 2020
THE LORD'S RETURN

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 41-44](#)

It's hard to imagine how Ezekiel must have felt when he saw the Lord returning to the Temple. The only thing close to it might be watching the memorial being built after the Towers fell in New York City. To visit Ground Zero or to see the lights shining on a clear night reminds all of us to never forget what happened on that terrible day. I still remember sitting in my car, waiting to make a left turn onto Alexander Road from Canal Pointe Blvd, as I headed into Princeton for school that morning. Classes were canceled. Work was suspended. We all watched in horror as the events unfolded. My wife Kristi remembers being at school when the news came down and scrambling to figure out if any of the parents of her kids had been trapped in the towers as they fell. One of my good friends was mobilized as a National Guardsman and spent the next year serving as a chaplain at the site where they took the remains of those who had been killed so they could be identified. The experience was so traumatic for him that he ended up in therapy himself for almost a year. Another colleague of mine was serving as the senior pastor of 5th Avenue Presbyterian Church at the time and when the towers fell, he donned his clerical robe, threw open the doors of his sanctuary, and ran out into the streets to usher people into safety. Living in such close proximity to New York meant we knew people personally who experienced the loss of loved ones. Lisa Beamer, whose husband Todd lost his life heroically in the charge to retake Flight 93, went to church literally a few miles away. As terrible as that day was for so many, it is equally if not more powerful to watch our nation memorialize those who fell. Millions visit the memorial and museum each year to pay their respects. It is a powerful witness and testimony to the resilient heart of the American people.

Now multiply 9/11 many times over. Imagine not only the Towers going down but planes flying into the Capitol building in Washington DC or the White House. Imagine tanks rolling down the highways of our country. Imagine bombs being dropped on every major city. Imagine armies burning and destroying everything in their path. Imagine America in ruins. Imagine living in exile in some foreign nation for decades, wondering if you will ever return home. Now imagine a prophet coming to you and laying out the exact dimensions of a new Capitol being built. A new White House. A new Supreme Court building. Imagine that prophet rolling out the blueprints of every national monument and showing them to you. Imagine him telling you a time is coming soon when you will return and America will be reborn. Can you imagine your excitement and joy? The feeling of national pride that would swell in your heart?

“Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east. And the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory. And the vision I saw was just like the vision that I had seen when he came to destroy the city, and just like the vision that I had seen by the Chebar canal. And I fell on my face. As the glory of the Lord entered the temple by the gate facing east, the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the Lord filled the temple.” (Ezekiel 43:1-5) It is impossible to overstate the joy Ezekiel must have felt as he sees this vision the of the Lord's return. As painful as it was for him to see the Lord leaving the Temple in his earlier visions, it is now equally exciting to witness the Lord's return. God had not forgotten His people! God had not abandoned His promises! God would prove faithful! No wonder he fell on his face!

Life is often hard. There are moments, even seasons, where we feel like everything has come crashing down around us. We lose our job. Our cars are repossessed. Homes go into foreclosure. Relationships

break down in divorce. We experience the sudden, tragic loss of someone we love. Global pandemics exacerbate existing social tensions. Rioting and looting and violence breaks out in our streets. Men and women of color seek justice to redress historic wrongs. Law enforcement officers are attacked in the streets. All kinds of extremist organizations try to use the chaos to their advantage. It feels like things are coming apart at the seams. There is so much in this world that brings us pain and heartbreak. It can even feel at times like the Lord has abandoned us. Ridden off on his chariot somewhere far away, never to return. Don't believe the lie! God is faithful! He is true! He is steadfast in His love! He will never forsake or abandon us! He is with us! His glory is our sanctuary and our rearguard! If we walk by faith. If we trust in Him. If we surrender to His will and His ways. He will provide. He will restore the years the locusts have eaten. He will rebuild the ruins of our lives. He will bring forth new growth and new life from the barren ground. This is His promise and He will never fail!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 45-48

September 15, 2020
LIVING WATERS

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 45-48](#)

We love the idea of living water. Water that runs. Water that flows. Water that is constantly moving. Refreshing. Renewing. I think of taking off my shoes and socks after a long day of hiking to dip my feet in a cold mountain stream. I think of the water features I see in so many landscaping plans because the sound of flowing water soothes the soul. I think of the wells I've seen around the world as locals look for fresh sources of water to sustain life. Living water is essential. We simply cannot live without it. And that's why the Bible uses this image over and over again to depict the coming Kingdom of God.

Ezekiel sees a final vision. Water flowing from the Temple of God. It begins as a trickle but soon becomes a mighty river, flowing southeast out of Jerusalem towards the Dead Sea. The region around the Sea is a wasteland. A desert. A void. A place where nothing grows. And yet, as the river reaches the sea, this amazing miracle takes place! Trees begin to grow on either side. Fruit appears, providing food and sustenance to all. Leaves bloom and blossom, without withering or fading. The water itself teems with life. Fish of every kind find a home there. As the waters reach the Sea, they bring it from death to life. The saltwater turns fresh and it begins to produce a hundredfold. Yes, there are still reminders of the former days. Still reminders of the death that once reigned here. The marshes and swamps retain their salty character but those simply serve as witnesses to the miracle of resurrection that has taken place!

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

God is still on the move, friends! Even after all these centuries, lives are still being changed by the gospel! It moves out into the wasteland of our world. Into the darkest places where death reigns. And it brings life. Hope. Joy. Peace. Churches sprout up along its banks, bearing the fruit of the Spirit to sustain the nations. As they seek Christ themselves, they find their leaves never wither. The world itself is renewed. Restored. Redeemed. Where O Death is now thy sting? Where O Death is now thy victory? The Living Water that Christ offers us fills the void! It becomes a spring of water welling up continually in our souls. Healing our hurts. Easing our pain. Comforting our grief. Sustaining us until the day when Christ will come again to wipe away every tear and make all things new.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 1-3

September 16, 2020

LIVING A GODLY LIFE IN AN UNGODLY WORLD

Readings for today: [Daniel 1-3](#)

“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 carted off into exile in Babylon. A traumatic, painful experience. Once he arrived in Babylon, he was identified as a young man of promise and removed from his family. Sequestered in the king’s household, he began training as a wise man. Someone who would counsel the king on the most important matters. Someone who would serve the empire and seek to expand its pagan 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. He treats the man with gentleness and respect. And the results speak for themselves. God is glorified and Daniel’s stature rises in the court.

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. “Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him. To you, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and might, and have now made known to me what we asked of you, for you have made known to us the king’s matter.” (Daniel 2:20-23) 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 the pre-existent Christ 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)

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

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 4-6

September 17, 2020
LOVING THE LOST

Readings for today: [Daniel 4-6](#)

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

Daniel embodies this love as well. His close relationship with the kings he serves is well-attested in the chapters we read today. When Nebuchadnezzar has a dream, Daniel is the man he calls on. It's important to note that Nebuchadnezzar even uses Daniel's Jewish name which is highly unusual as the Babylonians "renamed" people in order to assimilate them fully into Babylonian culture. "At last Daniel came in before me—he who was named Belteshazzar after the name of my god, and in whom is the spirit of the holy gods..." (Daniel 4:8) And Daniel clearly communicates his love and concern for Nebuchadnezzar as he interprets the dream for him. "Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was dismayed for a while, and his thoughts alarmed him. The king answered and said, "Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you." Belteshazzar answered and said, "My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies!" (Daniel 4:19)

Daniel's special relationship with the kings he serves is not limited to Nebuchadnezzar. It extends to Darius as well. "Then this Daniel became distinguished above all the other high officials and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him. And the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom." (Daniel 6:3) Clearly, Daniel's reputation precedes him. He is esteemed above all the wise men and satraps and other potential counselors of the king. Furthermore, when their jealousy gets the best of them and they craft legislation specifically attacking Daniel's faith, Darius laments what he has to do and is the first to arrive at the mouth of the lion's den to see if Daniel has survived. "Then the king, when he heard these words, was much distressed and set his mind to deliver Daniel. And he labored till the sun went down to rescue him...Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no diversions were brought to him, and sleep fled from him. Then, at break of day, the king arose and went in haste to the den of lions. As he came near to the den where Daniel was, he cried out in a tone of anguish. The king declared to Daniel, "O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?" 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." Then the king was exceedingly glad, and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. And the king commanded, and those men who had maliciously accused Daniel were brought and cast into the den of lions—they, their children, and their wives. And before they reached the bottom of the den, the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones in pieces." (Daniel 6:14, 18-20, 22-24)

One can see from such verses how Daniel loved the lost kings whom he served. He loved them as God loved them. He served them out of reverence for Christ. He gave his life to them in an effort to lead and

direct them to a saving faith. And his efforts were not in vain. Nebuchadnezzar gave glory to the God of Israel. Belshazzar was brought to his knees before the God of Israel. Darius issues a proclamation that all the people of the empire would worship the God of Israel. It's a powerful testimony and example to us all.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 7-9

September 18, 2020
VISIONS AND DREAMS

Readings for today: [Daniel 7-9](#)

If you are like me, you grieve deeply over what you see happening in our nation and around the world. The world is descending into tribalistic chaos. Divisions are turning violent. People have taken to the streets. Not just here in America but around the world. Some of the demonstrations are turning into riots and looting. People are being attacked, hurt, and even killed. It's a troubling time to be sure.

Daniel lived through such troubling times himself. As he lay on his bed at night, God gave him a glimpse of the future. Kingdoms rising and falling. Great empires clashing. Regular people caught in the crossfire as armies march their way all over the earth. It was a scary time. An unsettling time. A deeply tribal time where conflict and violence were part of everyday life. No one really knew when or where an army would appear on the horizon. No one really knew when allegiances would shift. Safety and security seemed forever out of reach.

In the midst of his nightmarish visions, Daniel receives a Word from the Lord. A Word of comfort. A Word of hope. A Word of security. There is one who reigns over the nations of the earth. One who rules the empires of this world. He is the Ancient of Days and to Him is given all glory and honor and dominion and power. "As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened...I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." (Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14)

This is a great Word for us today. In a time when it seems like the nations rage and kings plot in vain against the Lord and against His Anointed, it is comforting to know the Son of Man and the Ancient of Days still sit on their thrones. God is in charge, friends. He reigns and rules supreme. His authority is unquestioned and unchallenged. His dominion is from everlasting to everlasting. There will never be a time when God is not in charge. There will never be a time when God abdicates authority. There will never be a time when God is not at work bending even the sinful, broken ways of His creation to His perfect will. Yes, we are sinners. We have sinned individually. We have sinned corporately. No matter how hard we try, we tend to make a mess of things. Thanks be to God that His love is unconditional. His grace undeserved. His mercies new every morning. God is faithful. He will bring to completion the work of redemption He has begun. This is why Christians throughout history have always declared, "Our only hope in life and in death is that we belong body and soul to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ."

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 10-12

September 19, 2020
DANIEL'S APOCALYPSE

Readings for today: [Daniel 10-12](#)

Biblical prophets speak truth to power. Biblical prophets bring hope and assurance to God's people by reminding them of God's sovereign power and plan. Finally, Biblical prophets often foretell the future. This is certainly the case in Daniel 10-12. Here's a brief timeline...

535 BC - Third year of Cyrus the Great's reign. Daniel is now 85 years old and has been serving pagan kings for seventy years. Daniel's grief is most likely the result of the conflict those who have returned from exile under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra are facing as they rebuild both Jerusalem and the Temple. Daniel fasts for three weeks but unbeknownst to him, a battle is taking place in the heavenly realm. Gabriel - most likely the identity of the angelic being who visits Daniel - is at war with Satan and his demonic forces and only prevails with the help of another archangel named Michael. Gabriel has been sent by God to comfort Daniel. To give him hope for the future. Hard times are coming. Terrifying times. Forces will be arrayed in heaven and on earth against God's chosen people. Satan is seeking - as he always does - their complete eradication from the face of the earth. God, knowing what is to come, sends his angel to Daniel with a vision of the future so he can record it for future generations.

Three relatively minor kings follow Cyrus on throne. But the fourth referred to in Daniel 11 is Xerxes who ruled from 486-465 BC. His power and might was unrivaled at the time and as he seeks to expand his empire, he will provoke the might of Greece. After a number of years, Alexander the Great (336-323 BC) will unite the Greek into one empire and head east to destroy the Persians. Alexander dies tragically and his empire is then broken up into four pieces, ruled by four of his closest generals. The Ptolemaic (Southern king) faction goes to war with the Seleucids (Northern king) and their battle rages for generations with Israel as the primary "buffer state" in between. Eventually, a brutal tyrant named Antiochus Epiphanes IV will sweep down from the north and cause tremendous suffering for the people of God. "But he who comes against him shall do as he wills, and none shall stand before him. And he shall stand in the glorious land, with destruction in his hand." (Daniel 11:16) He will even seek to place a statue of Zeus in the Holy of Holies (abomination of desolation mentioned in 11:31) which in turn gives rise to the Maccabean revolt detailed in the Old Testament Apocryphal books of 1st and 2nd Maccabees.

All of this is ancient history to us but it was still very much in the future for Daniel. As God unpacks for him what is to come, he sees tremendous suffering ahead for his people. "And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time..." Under the influence of Haman, Xerxes will try to kill every single Jewish man, woman, and child within the borders of his empire. You can read all about this in the book of Esther. The wars between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid factions will take a tremendous toll on both land and people as many of the battles are fought in and around the borders of Israel. Pagan kings will rape and pillage and burn what God's people are trying to build. And the worst of them all - Antiochus Epiphanes IV - will literally torture and kill as many Jews as possible. At the same time these conflicts are raging on earth, there is a battle going on in heaven. Michael and his forces are fighting Satan and his demons and though the battle is fierce, they will prevail just as God's people will prevail on earth. This is why Daniel closes his book with such hopeful words, "But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of

the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” (Daniel 12:1-3)

What’s the relevance of all this history for God’s people today? No matter what you are going through, know that God is with you. He is literally fighting at your side. He is bringing about His purposes and His will even amidst your hardships. He will send His messengers to serve you. To comfort you. To bless you. He will bring you peace. Though you may experience suffering for a time, He will preserve your life. In fact, He has a reward waiting for you in His heavenly Kingdom. There the righteous will shine like stars in the sky and will reign with Him forever. As Christians, we do not place our hope in the things of this world. We do not place our hope in the nations of this world or the success of a particular political party. We do not place our hope in what we can achieve in this world. We place our hope in God alone.

September 21, 2020
REBIRTH OF A NATION

Readings for today: [2 Chronicles 36:22-23](#), [Ezra 1-3](#)

“And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.” (Ezra 3:11-13)

Second chances. How many of us have had them? Opportunities given to us in life that we do not deserve. Have not earned. Certainly should not expect. We hit rock bottom and suddenly there reaches down a hand to pull us back up. To lift us out of the pit of our despair. To set our feet on a new path. I know I’ve experienced several moments in my life where I hit rock bottom. Usually due to the choices I’ve made along the way. In college, it was my issues with alcohol. In Princeton, it was my addiction to achievement. In Wisconsin, it was my issues with workaholism. In each case, God was gracious to provide a second chance. An opportunity to repent, turn 180 degrees, and move in a new direction.

Israel had been in exile for years. They hit rock bottom in Babylonia. Their nation was wiped from the earth. Their capital city was razed to the ground. Their Temple was completely destroyed. They were forcibly removed from the Promised Land. Somehow, somehow they were able to maintain their cultural identity even amidst a foreign land and a pagan people. They still faithfully charted their genealogies. They still maintained their households. They kept up their roles as they waited for God’s promised redemption. Decades passed. Kings rose and fell. Empires changed hands. Finally, a new emperor arose by the name of Cyrus. He issued a decree promising the right of return to the people of Israel. A second chance.

I try to imagine what it must have been like to start over. To cross the borders of Israel for the first time in generations. To return back to the village where your family had lived for centuries. To reclaim your ancient inheritance. To rebuild your home. To re-till your fields. To graze your herds. To walk where your ancestors walked. To live where your ancestors had lived. To renew your covenant with the Promised Land. It must have been powerful. Add to that the laying of the foundation of the Temple. The rebuilding of the altar of God. The restoration of the sacrifices and feasts and holy days of celebration. No wonder the old men wept and the young men shouted for joy. This was the rebirth of a nation!

If you are like me, you wonder if our nation will ever experience such rebirth? Will there come a time when we too will see this kind of national unity restored? It’s hard to imagine. And sadly, the Bible is clear that such rebirth only comes after terrifying judgment. Like Israel, or any other nation for that matter, we have much to atone for. Our past is littered with sin. We are reaping what we’ve sown. All of the anger and hate and vitriol present in our culture is directly tied to our arrogance and pride and selfishness and greed. Yes, in many ways, America represents the best the world has to offer right now. Freedom. Democracy. Capitalism. These things have lifted millions out of poverty and oppression and this is worthy of praise. At the same time, human sin knows no bounds. It corrupts all it touches. So even our best efforts fall short. Even our most significant achievements are not pure.

Over and over again, the Bible teaches that every generation must renew their covenant with the Lord. And the reality is we have become complacent over the last several decades. We have been living off the social, emotional, and national “capital” of generations past. Their sacrifices set the table but rather than build on what they have done, we turned inward. We made the same mistake Israel made. We lost sight of what it meant to seek God’s Kingdom first and instead starting building our own kingdom in our own strength with our own hands. Thus, the mess we find ourselves in. Will God give us a second chance? I truly hope so. But I also know it will only come as God’s people repent of their sin - both personally and corporately - before the Lord. The only chance our nation has is for the church of Jesus Christ to humble herself and pray. Seek God’s face and turn from their wicked ways. As we fall on our faces before the Lord, He promises to hear from heaven. Forgive our sin. Heal our land. Only then will we experience new birth.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 4-6

September 22, 2020
POLITICS IN THE BIBLE

Readings for today: [Ezra 4-6](#)

The return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon was a significant political event. Jerusalem was known throughout the region as a powerful and influential city. Once ruled by mighty kings with large armies who refused to bow the knee to the various empires who had attacked her over the years. Rebuilding her constituted a threat to the status quo. A threat to the established peace. A threat to the current political order. Furthermore, rebuilding the Temple was even more threatening. The Temple of God stood as the religious, social, and political center of the nation of Israel. To allow this structure to be rebuilt was to allow the people of God to reclaim their national identity. National identity leads to national pride. National pride would lead to calls for freedom, independence, and the re-establishment of the geographical borders laid out by God Himself. All of this created a lot of fear and unrest among the people who were living in the area at the time of the exile's return. Not only that but when they ask to join in the work, they are rejected. Not arbitrarily but because they are unclean and impure and God's Temple must remain holy as do God's people.

Thus begins a political back and forth. Letters are dispatched. Extensive searches are conducted in the archives of the empire. People leverage their influence and connections to try to either hinder or help the work. Names are dropped. Bribes offered. Anything to frustrate the purposes and plan of God. Initially, the political opponents of Israel are successful. The work ceases for a time. But God sends two prophets - both of whom we will read in a bit - with the message to resume work. To remember who has called them to this work. Who has authorized this work. And who gives them all the resources they need to accomplish this work. They answer to God alone and not to the kings and princes of this world. "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished." (Ezra 5:11)

It is tempting in our world today to think we need political cover to help us accomplish God's plan. It is tempting to cozy up to politicians and seek their approval for all we do. It is tempting to give them a platform at our events or in our churches or even in our pulpits with the hope that we will gain favor with them for the future. It is tempting to align ourselves with one political party or the other. It is tempting to rationalize the ungodly behavior of our political leaders with the hope we will gain access and influence. It is tempting to compromise our convictions in order to gain their support. Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah all remind us otherwise. Our hope is in Christ alone. Our future is held in God's hands. Only He can provide the resources to accomplish His plans. Only He can give us the power and authority to live and to walk in His ways. We serve a greater King and a greater Kingdom, friends! We are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us! We live in this world but we are not of this world! Our citizenship is held in heaven!

At the same time, we do live in the real world. We cannot withdraw or stick our heads in the sand. We cannot pretend like the world around us doesn't exist. We cannot ignore the very real problems our nation faces nor the challenges that confront our political leaders. We must pray for them. We must respect and honor them. Given the opportunity, we must seek to share God's wisdom with them. Influence them in ways that align with God's Kingdom. Confront them gently but firmly on their shortcomings. This is our calling in this world because we serve the God of heaven and earth who reigns and rules over all.

Readings for tomorrow: Haggai 1-2

September 23, 2020
THE SECRET TO THE GOOD LIFE

Readings for today: [Haggai 1-2](#)

I talk to a lot of people who want to know the secret to a well-lived life. They spend their days searching for it. Their lives are filled with lots of activity that they hope will help them achieve the “good life” however they define it. But, at the end of the day, it seems forever out of reach. Just over the horizon. Just beyond their grasp. They never quite make it happen. Why? They are searching in all the wrong places. Matthew 6:33 says, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you.” All these things? What things are we talking about? All the things that make up the good life. The blessings of God. Favor with the people. Deep, intimate relationships. Abundant provision. These are the things God promises to those who seek Him first.

Sadly, we too often put the cart before the horse. We flip flop the clauses of the verse. We seek first “all these things” and put the Kingdom of God on the back burner. And we are not the first to make this mistake. This is what happened to the people of Israel in the prophet Haggai’s time. They focused on themselves. Homes. Fields. Crops. Herds. Trying like crazy to make life work in the new land they had returned to after exile. They didn’t attend to the things of God. They didn’t value the worship of God. They didn’t put God in first place in their lives and this was demonstrated by their neglect of the Temple. So God confronts them. “Then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, “Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now, therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes.” (Haggai 1:3-6) Their lack of provision. Lack of blessing. Lack of favor was a direct result of their unwillingness to seek God first above their own welfare which is why they never seemed to make any progress.

Sound familiar? I cannot tell you the number of couples I know who are stuck in their marriage. I cannot tell you the number of parents I know who feel stuck when it comes to their kids. As I look around our nation today, it seems clear to me that we are “stuck” in a rut of our own making with no hope of escape. What’s the answer? Turn to God. Surrender. Relinquish. Let go. Seek Him first. Follow His ways. Commit yourself to serve Him with all that you are and all that you’ve got. It’s the only answer I know and it breaks my heart that so many choose to remain stuck in their ways. If only they could lay hold of the promise Israel received through Haggai, “Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the Lord. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the Lord. Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts, according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. For thus says the Lord of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the Lord of hosts. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts.” (Haggai 2:3-9)

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 1-7

September 24, 2020
GOD DRAWS NEAR

Readings for today: [Zechariah 1-7](#)

It was hard waking up this morning to the gross injustice suffered by yet another African-American. The death of Breonna Taylor is not just tragic it is evil and unjust. It should never happen. The rioting and violence in the wake of the decision is also not just tragic. It cannot be justified in any way. It is evil and unjust and hurts the innocent. Whether it is the police officers or bystanders caught in the crossfire or it is the homes and businesses that suffer damage as people vent their outrage. Violence only begets more violence. Hatred only leads to more hate. Anger cannot bring about the righteousness of God.

Perhaps you're like me and you've wondered why in the world God would ever want to make His home on earth? Why would God want anything to do with us? Why would God not just wipe us out and start all over? He's certainly justified. Man's inhumanity to man knows no bounds. Evil seems to run amok. Sin corrupts all it touches. The history of the human race is a violent one and little, if any, progress seems to have been made. Ultimately, I have no idea what motivates God to continue to reach out in faithfulness to the creature He made in His own image. I only know it is true. It is what the Bible clearly teaches. From the opening pages of Scripture, God's desire is clear. He longs to walk with humanity. He longs to work in and through us to bring blessing to all He has made. He has given us dominion - not so we will "dominate" - so much as we will serve and care for all of creation. It is why God planted a Garden at the dawn of time. It is why God builds a Tabernacle in the wilderness. It is why God constructs a Temple in Jerusalem. It's why God rebuilds that Temple when the exiles return.

Listen to how the prophet Zechariah describes it, "Cry out, Thus says the Lord of hosts: I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion. And I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease; for while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster. Therefore, thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; my house shall be built in it, declares the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. Cry out again, Thus says the Lord of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem...And I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, a man with a measuring line in his hand! Then I said, "Where are you going?" And he said to me, "To measure Jerusalem, to see what is its width and what is its length." And behold, the angel who talked with me came forward, and another angel came forward to meet him and said to him, "Run, say to that young man, 'Jerusalem shall be inhabited as villages without walls, because of the multitude of people and livestock in it. And I will be to her a wall of fire all around, declares the Lord, and I will be the glory in her midst.'" (Zechariah 1:14-17, 2:1-5)

God will dwell with His people. Of that we can be sure. We see it so clearly in the Old Testament. We see it even more clearly in the New Testament. Jesus Christ. The Eternal, Only Begotten Son of God. The Incarnate Word Himself. Leaves His home in the heavenly dimension and comes to earth. He becomes flesh and blood and makes His dwelling among us. The original Greek literally says Jesus "tabernacles" among us! It takes your breath away. God with us. God for us. God drawing near to us. Even in our sin. Even as we wallow in violence and evil and suffering and pain. God draws near. Now matter what we have done or where we have been or what mess we find ourselves currently in. God draws near. No matter how unjust or oppressive or divided or broken our nation becomes. God draws near. Even in Breonna Taylor's apartment. God drew near. Even in the courtroom where a miscarriage of justice took place. God drew near. Even in the streets in the midst of the riots and protests. God draws near. While we were still enslaved to sin, God drew near. He spread out His hands. He was

nailed to a cross. He took all the sin and evil of the world on His shoulders. Our only hope, friends, in this broken and messed up and unjust world in which we live is that God is near.

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 8-14

September 25, 2020
THE DAY OF THE LORD

Readings for today: [Zechariah 8-14](#)

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

He gives them a picture of the future. When Messiah's Kingdom comes to earth. And so we read familiar words like...

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9)

"Then I said to them, "If it seems good to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them." And they weighed out as my wages thirty pieces of silver. Then the Lord said to me, "Throw it to the potter"—the lordly price at which I was priced by them. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord, to the potter." (Zechariah 11:12-13)

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn." (Zechariah 12:10)

"And the Lord will be king over all the earth. On that day the Lord will be one and his name one." (Zechariah 14:9)

And these words - often quoted or alluded to throughout the New Testament - remind us God is in control. God reigns sovereign over all the earth. His plan is being worked out. His purposes are coming to pass. His will is being done on earth as it is in heaven.

Until that great Day comes, what should then we do? Cling to hope. Cling to faith. Cling to God. He will never let us down. His promises are sure. His faithfulness is great. His steadfast love is loyal and true. Zechariah encourages us just as he encouraged God's people so many centuries ago. "Thus says

the Lord: I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain...Thus says the Lord of hosts: Behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country, and I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness.” (Zechariah 8:3, 7-8)

“On that day the Lord their God will save them, as the flock of his people; for like the jewels of a crown they shall shine on his land. For how great is his goodness, and how great his beauty!” (Zechariah 9:16-17)

“I will strengthen the house of Judah, and I will save the house of Joseph. I will bring them back because I have compassion on them, and they shall be as though I had not rejected them, for I am the Lord their God and I will answer them.” (Zechariah 10:6)

The Lord is our God. We are His people. When we call on Him, He will answer. When we knock, the door is always open. When we’ve sinned, there is always grace. Believe this for your life today!

Readings for tomorrow: Esther 1-5

September 26, 2020
#METOO

Readings for today: [Esther 1-5](#)

I wish I knew more about Queen Vashti. Her background. Upbringing. Life experience. Faith background. I would love to know what gave her the courage to stand up to her king. It couldn't have been easy. Women in her time were considered more property than people. Their lives utterly dependent on the good will of their husbands. They could be beaten at their husbands request. Kicked to the curb if they displeased their husbands in any way. Killed if their offense was great enough. And yet Vashti finds the strength to refuse when her king asks her to come before him. She publicly shames her king by refusing to be objectified in front of his court. She will not be his sexual plaything. She will not allow herself to be paraded in front of the men of the empire for their perverse entertainment. It's an unprecedented display of female power. One Queen Esther will follow in her own way as well.

Vashti's behavior presents a threat. What will happen if women follow her example? What will happen if women start refusing to obey their husbands? What will happen if women look down on their husbands with contempt when they attempt to subject them to sexual harassment and abuse? This cannot stand! Vashti must be punished! Vashti's behavior condemned! Imagine a world where women were considered the equals of men? Imagine a world where women held power over their own bodies? Imagine a world where men were not the masters of their homes? What kind of world would that be? What kind of chaos would ensue? The threat is dire enough for the king to issue an edict throughout his empire. From India to Ethiopia. 127 provinces in all. In every script and language. Men will rule over their wives. Their children. Their homes. It's almost laughable if it were not so tragically true.

Throughout human history, men have sought to subject women. Women have had to fight and struggle and claw their way to freedom. To full personhood. To equality. And while incredible progress has been made, the fight continues to this day. Think about the number of women who are sexually harassed and abused at some point during the course of their lives. A startling one in five women have reported being raped. One in four women have been physically assaulted by an intimate partner. One in four women report being sexually assaulted. And 81% of women report being sexually harassed. The rise of the #MeToo movement exposed the dark underbelly of our society. It gave many women the courage to speak out about their traumatic experiences. Like Queen Vashti, they refused to subjugate themselves to the men who abused them any longer.

The gospel flips the historic male-female dynamic on its head. Rather than rule over their households like mini-tyrants, men are called to serve their wives. Laying down their lives for them as Christ laid down His life for the church. Men are called to love their wives as Christ loves us. Men are called to sacrifice for their wives, creating an environment in their homes where the women in their lives can grow and thrive and flourish. Godly husbands will put the needs of their wives above their own. They will seek to empower their wives to fulfill whatever calling God places on their lives. They will treat their wives with dignity and honor and respect. There is no place in the godly home for abuse, neglect, or harassment. Indeed, the goal for every husband is to do all he can to present his wife before the Lord, "in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." (Ephesians 5:27)

September 28, 2020

PURIM

Readings for today: [Esther 6-10](#)

At a fundamental level, Esther is a story of divine reversals. God turning things on their heads in order to save His people. Mordechai is lifted up. Haman is brought low. Esther becomes Queen after Vashti is deposed. The Jewish people go from mourning to joy. From defeat to victory. From death to life almost overnight. Purim is inaugurated to commemorate the incredible miracle of God's deliverance and many Jews believe this is the one festival they will continue to celebrate even after Messiah comes.

It is impossible to imagine the emotions behind such a dramatic turn of events. One moment, you are cowering in your home in fear as the mob gathers to bring death and destruction. Local authorities are no help. In fact, they are leading the charge at the king's order. I think of my African-American friends who tell stories from their own family histories about the lynchings they witnessed during the Civil Rights struggle of the 20th century. I think of my South Sudanese friends who live in fear of violent retribution by their own government. I think of my Somali friends who are planting churches under the shadow of Islamic extremism. They know this fear well. It is a constant companion. I think of the women I've met who've suffered abuse, sexual or physical or otherwise. They often feel trapped and alone and afraid. I think of the children I've met who've been violently treated within their own family. I have seen the same fear in their eyes. It is crippling. It is paralyzing. It is dreadful.

But then a new edict is read! A new proclamation is issued! Freedom! Deliverance! Salvation! Think of the joy the Persian Jews, living in the midst of a hostile, pagan empire must have felt! They were not helpless! They were not alone! God had raised up a deliverer! A savior! A messiah! In the person of Esther. In the person of Mordechai. God was acting anew to protect His chosen people. Now think of the joy that accompanied the Emancipation Proclamation or the Civil Rights Act or the election of President Obama in our own time. Think of the joy that accompanied the permanent cease-fire agreement in South Sudan. (The terms of which were unfortunately violated almost immediately...) Think of the joy that comes when entire villages are saved by the gospel and delivered from the influence of Islamic extremism. Think of the joy that comes to a woman when she finally finds the courage to leave her abuser, seek healing and help, and start a new life. Or the joy that comes to children as they experienced love for the first time. These too are Purim.

And what about your life? What about the bondage you have faced or currently are facing? Is it addiction? Is it slavery to sin of some sort? Is it the darkness of depression? The painful affliction of a mental, emotional, or physical illness? Where do you need deliverance today? Where do you need a savior? In what corners of your heart do you still cower in fear? Afraid of what tomorrow may bring? Let Esther give you hope! Even at the 11th hour, God is still working to bring salvation!

Readings for tomorrow: Malachi 1-4, Psalms 50

September 29, 2020
WORSHIP IN COVID TIMES

Readings for today: [Malachi 1-4](#), [Psalms 50](#)

God doesn't grade on a curve. He will never be satisfied with leftovers. Never be content to take second place. Will not allow us to take Him for granted or treat Him with disdain. God is a refining fire. A purifying fire. A cleansing fire. Malachi testifies to the fact that when the great Day of the Lord comes and Jesus returns in all His glory, all that is evil and arrogant and corrupt in this world will be burned by fire. All that is sinful and impure and ungodly in our lives will be set ablaze. The gold will be refined. The silver purified. Only that which is of the Lord will endure.

“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts.”
(Malachi 4:1-3)

It's a sobering vision. One that should challenge and convict us as it did the people of Israel. They had taken their relationship with God for granted. They were not giving their best to God. Their offerings were polluted. The animals brought for sacrifice represented the worst of their flocks. Blind. Lame. Broken. Bruised. They simply didn't measure up to the worship God deserves and demands. The priests refused to honor God's name. They would not listen to His Word. They were unfaithful to the covenant God had established. Therefore they fell under God's judgment and it was terrible. “But you have turned aside from the way. You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the Lord of hosts, and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you do not keep my ways but show partiality in your instruction.” (Malachi 2:8-9)

What is the worship God demands from us? Malachi is clear, “For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts.” (Malachi 1:11) God will be glorified. His name will be lifted up. He will be worshiped by the nations of the earth. The people He loves and created will honor Him by giving Him the full devotion He deserves. They will burn incense. They will bring pure offerings. The best of their flocks. The best of their fields. They will not just go through the motions but with full hearts come to worship the Lord in Spirit and in Truth.

God expects no less from us. We who have been saved by Jesus Christ have seen His glory. The glory of the One and Only Son come from the Father. As such, more is demanded from us. More is expected. God desires our full worship. God desires our full devotion. He will never rest until He has the highest place in our lives. And it doesn't matter what's happening in the world around us. It doesn't matter how difficult life's circumstance may be. It doesn't matter what barriers may exist or what inconveniences we have to endure. God demands our worship. God deserves our worship. Now more than ever we have the opportunity to come before Him and give Him praise.

Throughout history and throughout the world today, God's people gather for worship. They gather in the midst of war. They gather in the wake of natural disasters. They gather in the face of pandemics. They gather because God has called them to come before Him as a people. As a family. We are blessed

in our day and age to gather virtually as well as physically. We are blessed to share communion and receive God's Word. God is using any and all means to make Himself known. He is lifting His name on high. His glory is truly filling the earth. And the amazing miracle is we are invited into this experience! The door is open to His Presence! He is lowering every mountain. He is raising up every valley. He is making every crooked way straight for His people. Friends, may you find joy and peace and strength as you worship God in Spirit and in Truth yourselves!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 7-10

September 30, 2020
RACISM IN THE BIBLE

Readings for today: [Ezra 7-10](#)

Today's reading definitely presents a challenge. Particularly since we live so far removed from the specific cultural situation Ezra faced as the Israelites returned from exile. It is deeply offensive to our 21st century sensibilities to imagine a group of men initiating a mass divorce simply over race and/or nationality. We rightly wonder what happens to the women and children who are kicked to the curb? Are they left destitute? Is this of the will of God? Or was this an example of early Pharisaism rearing its ugly head? Zealousness for the Law of God taken to a logical extreme? Moreover, many wonder if this is yet another example of God's Law remaining culturally bound? Irrelevant to our modern lives? After all, how can we respect a God who commands the breakup of so many families?

This is what makes Bible reading such a challenge. We can't just read the words on the page and accept them at face value. We have to dive deeper to understand the cultural currents of the day and how this story fits if we want to understand. Furthermore, we have to acknowledge the cultural assumptions we ourselves bring to the text. We are not objective observers. We too have biases and perspectives that are shaped by current cultural movements like #MeToo, feminism, white supremacy, #BlackLivesMatter, and more. These currents will shape how we respond to the text. It's hard to lay these things aside and try to walk a mile in Ezra's shoes.

So why was Ezra so upset over the intermarriage of Israel with their pagan neighbors? And why does he call for them to "put aside" the foreign women and their children? And what were the social ramifications of such a drastic move? First and foremost, we need to understand that in ancient near east culture, ethnicity, tribal identity, and religion all overlapped. You see something similar in the world today where Islam is so closely identified with the Arabic ethnicity. Tribal kingdoms were defined in a very real sense according to the god they worshiped. Each nation had their own god and their own unique religious practices. Their god ruled over a specific territorial boundary which defined the geographic limits of a particular kingdom. Other features that defined tribal and/or national identity had to do with the personality of the king who ruled, the language they spoke, and then, downstream from the rest, the particular physical features of the people themselves. One can see how different this is from modern racial theory forged in the wake of the horrors of the Holocaust and ethnic purges of the last 150 years.

From a Biblical standpoint then, if one married a pagan, one pledged allegiance in a certain sense to their god. This obviously represents a fundamental break with the First Commandment which is why Ezra reacts so strongly to the news. Furthermore, intermarriage also brought into question one's tribal and/or national identity. It was an open question whether one could actually be an Israelite if one married a non-Israelite. One would always be suspect as would one's children. If/when an invasion took place, whose side would you be on? Could you be trusted? All these were very real questions for a fragile group of people seeking to reestablish themselves and rebuild their nation. Certainly there were options for non-Israelites to become Israelites. The book of Ruth is a great example and a story the people in Ezra's time would have known well. However, in order to become an Israelite one had to renounce any connection to their former god and their former people. "Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16)

Hopefully, this helps us understand Ezra's dilemma and heartbreak. He is ashamed. He is afraid. He knows his history well and he knows what happens when God's people are unfaithful. "O my God, I

am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt. And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today.” (Ezra 9:6-7) He tears his robe. He rips his beard. He falls on his face before God and intercedes for the people.

As he prays, a few men come forward with a solution. What if everyone who has taken a foreign wife puts her aside? What if they separated out the foreign women and children as an act of repentance? This seems good to Ezra. The proclamation goes forth. Those found guilty repent. And the story ends. We don’t know how it turns out for the women and children. Are they simply cast aside? Left to fend for themselves? Surely not as God’s Law is just as clear about how we treat the foreigner and stranger and most vulnerable in our midst as it is about intermarriage.

So what happened? No one can say with certainty. Here I can only offer a modern day analogy. In many places in Africa, it is common for the men to take more than one wife. Polygamy is not God’s design for marriage so I’ve encouraged them to choose one wife and essentially “put away” the others. They remain in the household under the economic care and protection of the man of the house but he lives in covenant faithfulness with only one woman. He provides for them. He takes care of their children. He still fulfills all his responsibilities as a husband and father so they are not left destitute on the streets. It’s not a perfect solution but it is one offered in an attempt to bring the family into covenant faithfulness to the gospel.

So where do you find yourself today? What does covenant faithfulness look like for you? Where are you living in covenant obedience? Where are you living in disobedience? Is your heart grieved by the brokenness and sin of your life?

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 1-4