

APRIL 2021

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April 1, 2021
WITNESS

Readings for today: [Joshua 20-22](#), [Luke 6:1-26](#)

“The people of Reuben and the people of Gad called the altar Witness, "For," they said, "it is a witness between us that the Lord is God." (Josh. 22:34)

What does it mean to be a witness? And what are we “witnessing” to? For the tribes of Israel, the altar by the Jordan was built to remind them they were all part of one large family. Deeply connected by their common kinship with Abraham but also their covenant with God Himself. The tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh were concerned that future generations might forget this connection and start to see the Jordan River as the boundary between God’s people and the rest of the world. They didn’t want to be left out so before they crossed the Jordan to take possession of their inheritance, they built a monument of “imposing size.” Not for burnt offerings. Not for sacrifices. But a witness to all of Israel that they were one people under Yahweh. Every time an Israelite would pass by the monument, it would “witness” to their shared history and deep connection.

In the Book of Acts, Jesus calls us “His witnesses.” We are witnesses in our neighborhoods, cities, nations, and to the very ends of the earth. In this way, we are living memorials to all God has done. We are living monuments to a shared history. A common heritage. The deep connection we share as God’s chosen people. We “witness” to the glory and goodness of God. We “witness” to the unity we share as the family of God. Anytime someone “passes us by” or interacts with us on any level, they should leave having “witnessed” the mercy and grace of God and having felt the deep love we have for one another.

Ultimately, the Bible itself is the pre-eminent witness. I love what Joshua 21:45 says, “Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.” The only reason we know this statement is true is because we have an accurate record of what took place. This is why we read the Old Testament. Within its pages, God “witnesses” to us over and over again of His great faithfulness and love. Even in the face of our sin. Even in the face of our rebellion. Even in the face of our evil. Even in the face of all our brokenness, God pursues us. God relentlessly chases us. God never lets us go.

I know reading through the Bible in a year is not easy! It indeed is a “monument of imposing size!” But as sit with God’s Word and prayerfully reflect on all He has to say, we are shaped and formed in ways we cannot begin to imagine.

Readings for tomorrow: [Joshua 23-24](#), [Luke 6:27-49](#)

April 2, 2021
BLESSINGS

Readings for today: [Joshua 23-24](#), [Luke 6:27-49](#)

Recently, I've been reflecting on all the blessings I've been given in my life. Blessings I did not earn. Blessings I did not seek. Blessings I could never have gained on my own. I grew up in a family where hard work and commitment were prized. My father's family spent their lives farming in western Nebraska. My mother's family spent their lives ministering in southern Indiana. Both sets went through periods of hardship and struggle. Both sets experienced success and failure. Both sets persevered. Family was a priority. Faith was the rule rather than the exception. Children were expected to work alongside the adults. Talent and ability was identified at a young age and nurtured. Education was seen as the key to creating greater opportunity. Sacrifices were made in order to help the next generation build on what previous generations had built. When I was young, I took my upbringing for granted. Now that I am older, I am learning just how rare it can be. I travel the world and meet people from all walks of life and I can tell you firsthand that I am blessed beyond measure. I had access to resources most people can only dream of growing up. I have been given so many opportunities along the way. None of this was my doing. It was all the Lord.

Perhaps that's why I love these words from the end of the Book of Joshua so much. "I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant. Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:13-15) Israel was a blessed nation. Chosen by God. Not because she was the strongest or the greatest but simply out of grace. God gave her a new name. A new identity. A new Law. A Tabernacle in which to worship. A Promised Land in which to dwell. Abundant resources to harvest. Power over her enemies. And all He asks in return is faith. All He wants from His people is for them to love Him with all their hearts. Worship Him exclusively as He rightly deserves.

When you think back over the course of your life, what do you see? Do you see abundant blessings that can only come from God? Blessings not just in material wealth but blessings that are spiritual, emotional, and relational? Do you see God at work even the hard times? Amidst the failures? Does He show up in the middle of your pain and suffering to bring comfort? Are these not also unlooked for blessings that we have not earned nor have a right to expect? In light of all God has done for you in the course of your life...in light of all God has done for you on the cross...will you choose to serve Him? Love Him? Place your faith in Him? This is the choice Joshua sets before Israel and it is the choice God sets before us this Good Friday. Choose this day whom you will serve. The gods of this earth who exploit and oppress and ultimately take everything from you or the God of the universe who gives up everything - including His very life - to save and deliver you.

Readings for tomorrow: [Judges 1-2](#), [Luke 7:1-35](#)

April 3, 2021
EVANGELISM

Readings for today: [Judges 1-2](#), [Luke 7:1-35](#)

“And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.” (Luke 7:22)

The gospel is good news. Somehow that message has become twisted in our world. So many see the gospel as bad news. They see it as restrictive. Oppressive. Ignorant. Unjust. Judgmental. Condemnatory. But nothing could be further from the truth. When people encountered Jesus, they found new life. Literally. The blind would begin to see. The deaf would begin to hear. Lepers would be cleansed and restored to community. The dead were raised. Everywhere Jesus went, new life broke out. Joy was His constant companion. Restoration and reconciliation followed in His wake. And yet, it was never enough. Eventually the praise turns to hate. The cries of adulation turn to calls for condemnation. Crucifixion. It would be the most baffling thing in the world except that it's nothing new.

The people of Israel have just buried another great leader. A leader in mold of Moses. A man who led them faithfully for decades. They've come a long way since Egypt. No longer slaves. No longer living under tyranny and oppression. No longer a foreign people in a foreign land. They have come through the fire. They have come through the flood. They have come through the wilderness. And God has provided every step of the way. He gave them food to eat. Water to drink. He gave them victory over their enemies. All of this is good news! It's something every Israelite should know by heart. And yet we read this heartbreaking verse, “And there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.” (Judges 2:10) How is this possible? How is it possible to forget the good news?

Sadly, I see the same thing happening all around us today. A generation rising who has forgotten the good news of the gospel. A generation who do not know the Lord or the work He has done. A generation who has bought the lie that the good news is actually bad news. And just to be clear, this has very little to do with age. This isn't about young or old. This is not a complaint about “kids these days.” It has to do with the spirit of our day. We are living in a time when everyone wants to do what is right in their own eyes. Everyone wants to be free to follow whatever desires seem good to them. It's very similar to the time of the Judges. A time in Israel's history where she suffered horribly. A time in Israel's history where terrible and tragic things took place on a regular basis. It was a time in Israel's history where sin held sway and wreaked havoc on people's lives. So we shouldn't be surprised when a mass shooter opens fire in a King Soopers. We shouldn't be surprised when sexual abuse scandals come to light in Washington DC, Hollywood, and even in the sacred precincts of the church. We shouldn't be surprised when parts of the world starve to death while other parts live in abundance and plenty. We should grieve and weep and our hearts should break but we shouldn't be surprised. After all, when the good news is rejected, all we are left with is bad news. And the world is full of bad news these days, amen?

So what's the answer? The church. The people of God filled with the Spirit of God walking in obedience to God going forth to share the love of God with the world. The church has always been God's answer to the problems that exist in the world. Jesus Himself said, “whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me

anything in my name, I will do it.” (John 14:12-14) Imagine a church who loves the way Jesus loved? Imagine a church who sets her heart on serving the poor? Healing the sick? Visiting those who are in prison? Imagine a church who gives sight to the blind? Helps the deaf to hear? Embraces the lepers of our day? Imagine a church who laid down her arms in the culture war? A church who laid aside her pursuit of power and wealth and cultural privilege and instead gave herself away for the sake of the gospel? Would this not be good news? Would not the world catch a glimpse of the Kingdom?

You say, it’s not possible. I know how you feel. I too find it easy to despair. But then I see the good news in action. I see it in the lives of ordinary people who do extraordinary things in the name of Jesus. I see it in the lives of foster parents who take children into their home. I see it when business owners give ex-cons a second change. I see it when couples fight for their marriages. I see it when addicts find healing and embrace in community. I see it when rich and poor come together in real relationship. All of a sudden needs are met. Lives are changed. All in the name of Jesus. I see it globally as entire villages come to know Christ. Abuse rates drop. Addiction rates plummet. Communities start to experience the blessing of a new way of life. The sick are healed. The dead are raised. Yes, I’ve seen these things with my own eyes. The good news is real, friends! It’s news our world is desperate to hear and experience for themselves. As we celebrate Easter this year, let’s remember where we go from here. We cannot keep this message to ourselves! It is a message designed to be personally delivered to every person on the face of the earth. Who are you sharing the good news with today?

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 3-7, Luke 7:36-8:39

April 5, 2021
THE STRUGGLE IS REAL

Readings for today: [Judges 3-7, Luke 7:36-8:39](#)

“Life is pain, highness.” - Dred Pirate Roberts

I grew up in the 1980's so the Princess Bride is one of my favorite movies and the line above is one that's always stuck with me. The Dred Pirate Roberts lived a life of incredible struggle and heartache and pain. He's persevered through hardship and suffering. He's overcome incredible obstacles. He's survived impossible odds. The princess, on the other hand, lived a life of privilege. Growing up amidst all kinds of wealth and splendor. Servants to meet her every need. At the same time, she too has suffered loss. Heartbreak. She grieves over the one she loves whom she believes is dead. I don't want to spoil the ending for those who haven't see it but suffice to say both characters have learned and grown and battled through life. It's not been easy.

“Now these are the nations that the Lord left, to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before...They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses.” (Judges 3:1-2, 4)

Israel failed. She lost her nerve. She took her eyes off of Yahweh and succumbed to fear. As a result, the Promised Land was not fully conquered. The pagan nations not fully driven out. They remain as a perpetual test to Israel's faithfulness. Would they stay true to the commandments of the Lord or would they follow the ways of the Canaanites? The Book of Judges tells the tragic tale of Israel's descent into idolatry and spiritual darkness. All the skeletons in Israel's closet are exposed and put on display for generations to read. The moral character of many of the judges is suspect. Their conduct immoral. Their decisions unwise. It's a story of compromise. A story that depicts what happens when we try to embrace the ways of God and the ways of the world. It's a story where the faithfulness of God is revealed in His discipline and loving correction. Over and over again, He will give the people of Israel over into the hands of their enemies. He will withdraw His protective hand from them. He will allow the nations around them to conquer and pillage and destroy; all in order to bring Israel back to repentance. Back to faith. Back to Himself.

Israel must learn to fight because life is a struggle. In the ancient near east, the struggle was literal. It took place on battlefields and within cities. It was a violent, brutal, harsh world full of pain. Israel would need to know how to fight back and defend herself. In the 21st century, we still fight battles. I think of our military men and women who go all over the world to defend the weak and oppressed. They fight against tyranny with such courage. I think of our police officers who put themselves in danger in the line of duty each and every day. Every call that comes in is a potentially violent situation they will be forced to handle. I think of our firefighters who are called to save lives, often at great cost. I think of dear friends I've had who've spent a lifetime fighting against systematic racism, abuse, and oppression. I think of Christian leaders I know around the world who are persecuted and have their lives threatened. I think of so many impoverished in our world today who, day in and day out, experience life-threatening suffering firsthand. They are well-acquainted with the pain. They know the heartache. And they fight. They struggle. They battle through each and every day. Perhaps even more pervasive are the battles we all face on the inside. The battles with depression, anxiety, and fear.

Despite the incredible wealth and privilege and blessing we live with in my community, we've never been more stressed. More discontent. More anxious and afraid.

We are being tested, friends. Day in and day out. Will we keep the commands of the Lord? Will we spend time with Him every day? Will we worship Him as He deserves each week? Will we honor the Sabbath? Will we give sacrificially and generously? Will we allow our hearts to be shaped by deep reflection on His Word? Will we surrender to His Spirit? Life is struggle. Life is pain. Life is not safe or easy. And anyone who says differently is selling something. (Again with the Princess Bride lines...) Does this mean things are hopeless? Should we just throw in the towel? By no means! God promises He will bear His fruit in the lives of those who walk with Him! Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Goodness. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control. These are the gifts of God for the people of God. In the midst of all life is throwing your way, turn to Christ! Let Him be your strength and your shield for the battles you fight!

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 8-10, Luke 8:40-56

April 6, 2021
HUMILITY

Readings for today: [Judges 8-10](#), [Luke 8:40-56](#)

One of my favorite books is by Andrew Murray. It's a classic titled Humility. A short little read with insights packed into every page. Here is how he defines humility. "Humility is nothing but the disappearance of self in the vision that God is all...The highest glory of the creature is in being only a vessel, to receive and enjoy and show forth the glory of God. It can do this only as it is willing to be nothing in itself, that God may be all. Water always fills first the lowest places. The lower, the emptier a man lies before God, the speedier and the fuller will be the inflow of the diving glory."

I think we can all agree humility is a virtue sorely lacking in our world today. The spirit of our age is arrogance, pride, criticism, entitlement, and self-indulgence. It infects our politics. It infects our workplaces. It infects our schools. Our homes. Our neighborhoods. Even our churches. Perhaps especially our churches. It's the spirit of the Pharisee. The spirit of self-righteousness. An unwillingness to submit to any other authority in our lives except our own. This includes God. Sure, we know how to say the right things. "God is first in my life!" "I love God the most!" "God is my all in all!" We sing songs that declare these truths. We sit through sermons where these truths are proclaimed. We tell these things to our Christian friends. But one look at our schedule. One look at our bank account. A glance at our Twitter feed, Instagram, or Facebook account. A moment of honest self-reflection. All these conspire to reveal what we really believe. We are our own gods.

Gideon was different. Not perfect. Not blameless in his generation. Not powerful and mighty among men. No, what marked him was his humility. The angel of the Lord found him treading out grain in a winepress. Providing for his family at great risk to himself. When the Lord called him to become the next judge over Israel, Gideon echoes Moses at the burning bush. "Who am I that you would send me?" So unsure of himself, he puts God to the test by laying out a fleece not once but twice! God honors his humble heart. Gideon was humble enough to place his faith and trust into action. He tears down the altar of Baal. He sends home his entire army before battle. And then when confronted at the beginning of Judges 8 by the Ephraimites who wanted to claim the glory, he humbled himself before them and honored them. It's a stunning display. Finally, when it is all said and done, the people want to make him king. He refuses the crown. He refuses to take God's rightful place in their lives. In the words of Murray, Gideon understood "the highest glory of the creature is in being only a vessel, to receive and enjoy and show forth the glory of God."

What about us? What does humility look like in our own lives? Surely, it is more than words. It is life lived intentionally under the sovereign authority of God. A life lost in the vision that God is all in all. A life lived before God, submitted to God, surrendered to God. What does such a life look like in the 21st century? It is a life of worship. Daily. Weekly. It is a life of Sabbath rest. It is a life of prayer. It is a life of reflection on the Scriptures. It is a life of service to the Kingdom. It is a life of devotion to our Lord. It is a life that intentionally directs all its resources - time, talent, treasure - towards God. It is a life that engages the world while remaining set apart. A life of risk where safety and comfort are sacrificed for the sake of the gospel.

Rest assured, such a life is not easy to live in our world today. Not with the demands on our time. Not with the demands on our resources. My wife and I were talking about this all the time. Even this past week, we had to make choices as my twins wanted to attend a swim team banquet on Maundy Thursday. Their connection to their teammates is part of what has got them through the last few months

under the restrictions of COVID. So we let them go. Was this the right choice? We aren't sure to be honest but we are having conversations all the time in our home about how we humbly honor and serve the Lord even in this particular season.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 11-12, Luke 9:1-27

April 7, 2021
JEPHTHAH'S SACRIFICE

Readings for today: [Judges 11-12](#), [Luke 9:1-27](#)

When we travel to Ethiopia, we often head into the rural areas to visit village churches. As we walk along the dirt paths, we pass home after home. Most of them are mud huts surrounded by a little brush fence. In the evenings, we see children driving whatever livestock (donkeys, chickens, goats, sheep etc.) the family owns into the enclosure. This keeps the animals safe and the house warm. It's a common custom all over the Middle East even to this day.

Hopefully, this places Jephthah's tragic vow in context. He fully expected the first thing to greet him when he returned home to be a goat or a sheep or some other animal. He most certainly did NOT expect it to be his daughter! So when she comes dancing out of the home with her tambourine, he tears his clothes. He instantly regrets the vow he made. He feels trapped. And how does his daughter respond? Her reaction is perhaps the most surprising part of this story. She willingly lays down her life for her father. She faces her fate with courage and faith. Taking two full months to say goodbye and grieve with her friends. Two full months to weep over what could have been.

It's a story that baffles us on a lot of levels. How could Jephthah sacrifice his own flesh and blood? How could Jephthah's daughter willingly lay down her life? And where is God in all of this? The cultural distance between this world and our own is almost insurmountable. However, one key to understanding is Judges 11:23-24, "So then the Lord, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them? Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the Lord our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess." Everyone in the ancient near east believed in gods. Dagon for the Philistines. Chemosh for the Amorites. Molech for the Ammonites. Every tribe had their own deity. Make the right sacrifices and you were awarded with great wealth, military might, and political power. Make the wrong sacrifices and your deity would turn his face from you, resulting in defeat. Tragically, the same began to hold true for Israel. As they adopted the ways of the Canaanites, Yahweh ceased, on some level, to be the One True God and became just another tribal deity to be appeased. Thus, Jephthah's tragic choice to sacrifice his daughter and her tragic choice to accept her fate. And the most important takeaway from the whole account is God's silence. Nowhere does the Bible say God is pleased with Jephthah's decision.

Excursus: One of the common mistakes that happens when we read the Bible is to assume God endorses everything that happens. This is a misapplication of the doctrine of inerrancy. Just because we believe the Bible is inspired and without error doesn't mean that God approves of every action His people take. For example, just because David had multiple wives and was a man after God's own heart doesn't mean God approves of polygamy. The story of the Bible is the story of God meeting His people where they are. Speaking to them in the cultural context in which they live. Revealing Himself through categories they can understand. The same is true for today.

As Christians, we claim to worship the supreme God of the universe. We claim to know the King of kings and Lord of lords. We claim to be heirs of His eternal Kingdom. But do our lives reflect this truth? If we are not careful, we can fall into the same trap Israel fell into. Accommodating our beliefs to the ways of this world. Bringing God down to our level. Limiting Him to our tribe. Reducing Him to our personal deity. When we do, we remake God in our image and He ceases to be God at all.

Readings for tomorrow: [Judges 13-14](#), [Luke 9:28-62](#)

April 8, 2021
DESIRE

Readings for today: [Judges 13-14](#), [Luke 9:28-62](#)

Samson is a cautionary tale. He is a man ruled by his appetites. Driven by his desires. An addict enslaved to the basest of emotions. His life is a study in contrasts. Miraculously conceived. Set apart from birth as a Nazarite. (No wine, cutting of the hair, or touching of dead bodies) He single-handedly delivers Israel from their enemies. At the same time, he despises his birthright. He intermarries with Philistines and sleeps with prostitutes. He eats honey from the carcass of a lion he's killed. He tells Delilah (yet another Philistine) the supposed secret of his strength and she cuts his hair. He is imprisoned and tortured but exacts vengeance on his enemies in one final act of martyrdom.

I have met Samson. Every time I look in the mirror I am reminded I too was once driven by sinful desire. Enslaved to the flesh as the Apostle Paul might put it. Sexual desire drove me to pornography. My drinking habits bordered on alcohol addiction. I've struggled with depression and despair in my life. It's been hard. At the same time, I'm blessed with an amazing family. A godly wife and four kids I love with all my heart. I've got great friends. A career I absolutely love. But my inner life used to be a mess. I too often believed the lie that I was at the mercy of what I feel. That I had no choice. Thankfully, I received great spiritual counsel and a lot of therapy over the years. Mentors, counselors, friends who acted as a spiritual and emotional guides to help bring peace to my soul. Most of all, I immersed myself in God's Word. I gave His Spirit the microphone in my life. I wanted Him to be the loudest voice in my head. The loudest voice in my heart. Constantly reminding me who I was created to be. Constantly encouraging me to live in light of God's transforming love.

I am not the only "Samson" out there. I cannot tell you the number of people I have counseled over the years in my office who seemingly cannot control their desires. Sexual appetites. Drug and alcohol addiction. Co-dependence. Suicidal ideation. It's heartbreaking. These are gifted people who have been blessed in every measure by God. They have families. They have friends. They have careers. They make good money and experience professional success. But their inner lives are a mess. Their souls are in turmoil. They feel trapped and enslaved and ruled by their passions. They buy into the lie that they were "made" this way and therefore have no choice. There are so many voices in their heads and hearts clamoring for attention. Demanding that they listen. It's paralyzing. It's crippling. And it breaks the heart of God.

Here's the truth of the gospel, friends. You have been set free! For freedom Christ has set you free so do not submit again to a yoke of slavery! Do not turn back to your former ways! Do not believe the lie that you are at the mercy of what you feel. You are not defined by your desires. You are not a slave to your emotions. Love the Lord with all your heart! Submit your desires to Him! Allow His Spirit to sanctify your emotions and your feelings. Keep in step with the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. In fact, you will find yourself beginning to desire what God desires. Holiness. Purity. Grace. Mercy. Compassion. These things flow from a heart surrendered to God.

Readings for tomorrow: [Judges 15-17](#), [Luke 10:1-24](#)

April 9, 2021
THE HARVEST

Readings for today: [Judges 15-17](#), [Luke 10:1-24](#)

“The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road.” (Luke 10:2-4)

This is one of my favorite passages to teach on in Ethiopia. Every time I prepare to go over there, I marvel at all God has done. In the last eighteen years, we have preached the gospel to 3.5 million people. Over 600,000 have now come to Christ. Our indigenous leaders have planted over 5000 churches and baptized over 100,000 new believers. And still the harvest remains plentiful! What God is doing in Ethiopia has spilled out into South Sudan and Uganda. In fact, we will be holding two training conferences there in just over a month. We already have our first church plant in Djibouti and planted 25 more in Myanmar. I fully expect this revival to reach Somalia and Eretria in a few years and then jump the Gulf into Saudi Arabia and Yemen. By the time I die, I am praying God gives us a chance to plant churches in Mecca.

The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. We are asking God to raise up more church planters from our indigenous partner denominations. We are asking God to raise up more churches in America to join this work. We are asking God to bring His resources to bear so we don't become the limiting factor in who God is seeking to reach. We need laborers who will pray. Laborers who will give. Laborers who will go. Laborers who will lead. There is an urgency to this mission! We cannot delay! We cannot let our fears get the best of us! God is sending these men and women out as lambs amidst wolves. The work will be hard. There is pain and suffering and persecution. Joining God on His mission always costs us dearly. But the price is worth it!

Every time I come back, I get asked the same question. Why do we not see the same revival happening in America? Why is the American church in decline even as the church in Ethiopia grows? My answer is always the same. The harvest is plentiful. Even here. Even in our country. But the laborers are few. In my experience, so few Christians have a passion to share their faith much less know how to do it. They struggle with self-confidence. They don't want to be laughed out of the room. They shy away from conflict. I sometimes wrestle with these feelings myself. But God's call still remains. Jesus tells His disciples to pray to the Lord of the harvest to raise up laborers and then in the same breath sends them forth. If we want to see revival come, we must join Jesus in His prayer and His work. We are part of the solution, friends! We are part of the answer to their own prayers! We have been called by God to go into the harvest field to reap what God has sown. You cannot be a Christian without being a laborer! You cannot be a follower of Jesus without being sent! You cannot be a disciple without being a missionary! Get engaged, friends! Join your brothers and sisters around the world and start reaping the glories of serving Christ!

Readings for tomorrow: [Judges 18-19](#), [Luke 10:25-11:12](#)

April 10, 2021
INHUMANITY

Readings for today: [Judges 18-19](#), [Luke 10:25-11:12](#)

Today we encounter some of the most difficult material in all of Scripture. We see Israel at her lowest point. She has forgotten Yahweh. She has become like all the pagan tribes around her. She is more focused on her own gratification than she is on serving and honoring the Lord. Her world is full of idolatry and violence. Yes, she still goes through the motions. She still makes her sacrifices. She still prays. Fasts. Appears before the Lord at the appointed times. But it's all empty at this point. Everyone is doing what seems right to them. They are all following their own ways. They are plumbing the depths of sin. They are pushing the boundaries of evil. Unspeakable atrocities are taking place in Israel such as the gang rape of a woman whose body is dismembered resulting in a genocidal war that basically annihilates an entire tribe. It's madness.

One of my favorite books is the Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad. With penetrating insight, he describes the nature of man. Given the right conditions. Given the right set of circumstances. We will all succumb to temptation. In the book, Kurtz sets himself up as a god to be worshipped. He exploits those around him. He uses them for his own personal gratification and enjoyment. He is evil and selfish and insane. Towards the end of the story, he finds himself dying as he "returns" to civilization. His life flashes before his eyes. He reflects back on all he has done. And his final words are, "The horror! The horror!"

Horror. It's a good word to describe what we read today from the book of Judges. There simply is nothing redemptive in the story. Nothing good. Nothing godly. Man's inhumanity to man is on full display. It's dark. It's evil. It's terrifying. Sadly, we see some of the same dynamics in play in our world today. Even amidst a global pandemic, many of our political leaders can't stop lying and using the crisis for personal gain. Many of them can't stop attacking each other with rhetoric that only incites further violence. It's horrifying. But it's not just them. It's us as well. The isolation of the past year has set everyone on edge. Our emotions are raw. Anxiety is high. We are reaping what we've sown. Tragically, the daily injection of fear into society has resulted in greater and deeper divisions. Judgment and condemnation have replaced grace and compassion. We have become less resilient. Less tolerant. Less able to accept difference. Instead, we fight over masking protocols. We assume the worst of the health professionals who've worked so hard to keep us safe and frankly, many of them assume the worst of us which is why we have to resort to public health orders in the first place. We cut off relationships with family members, friends, and our brothers and sisters in Christ over political, social, and cultural disagreements. We embrace rage, anger, and hate because it makes us feel powerful. Self-righteous. Safe. But the reality is we've never been more fragile. More vulnerable. So we take it another step further. We demand action. We restrict freedom. We call for a more totalitarian approach to life where speech is monitored. Different groups labeled and scapegoated. Blatant attempts are made to grab hold of power under the guise of either "draining the swamp" or "political reform." All this lays the groundwork where extreme elements open fire in grocery stores or attack Asian-Americans in the streets. It's all quite frightening and sadly, all too familiar.

If we're totally honest, we know all of us are guilty on some level. I give into fear. I give into anxiety. As the stress builds, it can bring out the worst in me. Darkness that I've tried very hard to bury deep starts to emerge. As I read our passage today, I realize all of us are perpetrators. All of us are victims. We are the Levite. We are the concubine. We've sacrificed others and we've been sacrificed for the sake of self-protection and self-gratification. In the Bible's judgment, "None is righteous, no, not one;

no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Romans 3:10-18)

Perhaps it's providential that we read this section of Judges as we come out of Holy Week. A period of time where we reflect on the Cross. On the death of God. The most horrific act in human history. We reflect on the price Jesus paid. The blood He shed. The penalty He bore. This past week we spent time reflecting on the suffering He endured. The pain He experienced. The heartbreak of betrayal. We reflected on the depth of our sin. The depravity of our nature. The darkness of our hearts. We reflected on the cost of our salvation. On what it took to redeem us from sin and death. To deliver us from evil. And as we reflected we also remembered our salvation! God plunging Himself into the horror of our condition! Plumbing the depth of our darkness! Immersing Himself in the breadth of our madness! And embracing us as His own! Today we declare there is hope for the Levite and his concubine! Today we declare there is hope for the Kurtz's of our world! Today we declare there is hope for the fearful and afflicted and anxious and afraid! Today we declare there is hope even for us! And that hope is found in Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: None

April 12, 2021

FINDING HOPE IN THE ORDINARY

Readings for today: [Judges 20-21](#), [Ruth 1-4](#), [Luke 11:13-12:3](#)

Without a doubt, Judges is a tough read. Especially towards the end. It's hard to see a culture descend into chaos. Hard to watch the people of God abandon the ways of God and do what is right in their own eyes. It's hard to watch evil flourish and good languish. And if we are honest, it raises all kinds of questions. Where was God in the time of the judges? Why didn't He do something? Was He powerless to stop what was happening? Or worse, did He just not care?

In many ways, the Book of Ruth is the Bible's answer to these questions. "In the days when the judges ruled the land..." there was a widow named Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law named Ruth. Two ordinary people from an ordinary town called Bethlehem whom God would use to bring about His salvation purposes. The story is a tender one. Naomi initially has it all. A faithful husband who cares for his family. Two sons to carry on the family line. They have enough means to travel to Moab to escape a famine in their hometown of Bethlehem. Once there, disaster strikes. Elimelech dies followed by both his sons a decade later. This would have been devastating in the ancient world. The three widows would immediately drop to the lowest rung on the socio-economic ladder. Each day would be a struggle to survive especially since Naomi was so far from her home and kindred and country. With little access to resources and certainly no social net to protect them, Naomi makes the decision to go back home. She encourages both her Moabite daughters-in-law to return to their families where they can get the support they need and perhaps marry again. Ruth refuses and makes this incredible statement of faith, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For 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) What transpires next is nothing short of miraculous. They return back home to Bethlehem. Ruth finds favor in the eyes of Boaz, a kinsman-redeemer. She eventually marries him and they conceive a son named Obed. Obed is the father of Jesse. Jesse the father of David. David will become the greatest king in Israel's history.

So let's just pause and reflect for a moment. The last verse in the Book of Judges says, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." (Judges 21:25) The final verses of the Book of Ruth give us the genealogy of David the king. The man after God's own heart. The king who would lead Israel to a deeper and more righteous relationship with the Lord. No longer would the people of God do "what is right in their own eyes" because they now have a king who will show them how to do what is right in God's eyes. It's a beautiful picture of how God uses the ordinary things of this world to accomplish the extraordinary!

When we ask the question - "Where is God?" - in the face of all the evil and sin and suffering we see around us; we often betray our false expectations. Unless God acts in miraculous ways, we don't seem to take Him all that seriously. We tend to discount the ordinary. The everyday. The moment by moment when God shows up in our lives. But if God can use the plight of three desperate widows in the time of the Judges to change the course of a nation's history, why can't He use you? Why can't He use me? Ruth did nothing special except remain faithful. She loved her mother-in-law. She worked hard to provide for them. She took advantage of the opportunities God presented to them. She was both bold and humble. And God honored her prayers. What does faithfulness look like in your life these days? Are you working hard to provide for those who depend on you? Do you take advantage of the opportunities God sends your way in the ordinary course of daily life? Where do you need to act with humility and boldness? May the Lord honor your prayers as you seek to love and serve Him.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 1-2, Luke 12:4-34

April 13, 2021
GOD IS FAITHFUL

Readings for today: [1 Samuel 1-2](#), [Luke 12:4-34](#)

“And I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. And I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed forever.” (1 Samuel 2:35)

Today’s reading represents a turning point in salvation history. The time of the Judges is coming to an end. Eli and his “worthless” sons will die and a new prophet will arise. One who will remain faithful. One whose heart will be true. One who will seek the Lord and lead the people well. Samuel will be the last of the judges. He will be the bridge from the days when Israel had no king and everyone did what was right in their own eyes to a day when the Davidic monarchy was established and a golden age for Israel ushered in.

I love where Samuel’s story begins. With a barren woman who is losing all hope of ever bearing children. Sounds so familiar does it not? God bringing something beautiful out of our barrenness? Making a way where there seems to be no way? Making possible what otherwise seems impossible? He did it with Sarah. He did it with Rachel. Now He will do it with Hannah. Hannah is a faithful woman. She prays fervently for a son. So fervently, Eli believes she is drunk! Her desire is so strong, she promises to dedicate her son to the Lord from birth. “O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.” (1 Samuel 1:11) Miraculously, the Lord answers her prayer. Opens her womb. And Samuel is conceived.

Now is where the true test will begin. Will she make good on her promise? Will she dedicate her son to the Lord? Will she give Samuel over to Eli to be raised as a prophet and a priest for Israel? Hannah’s faith is amazing. Listen again to what she tells Eli after Samuel has been weaned... “Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord. For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord.” And Samuel worshiped the Lord there.” (1 Samuel 1:26-28)

It’s a powerful story of God’s faithfulness. God already knows what’s going to happen to Eli and his sons. He knows the plans He has for them and He has prepared a successor to be raised up to replace them. A priest who will be faithful and true. Who will lead Israel well as she moves through this transition. Samuel will seek God with all His heart and mind. He will love God and honor Him all the days of His life. And when the time comes for him to hand off his leadership to a king, Samuel doesn’t hesitate. He humbly submits to the will of the Lord.

Friends, God remains faithful! He will raise up leaders for God’s people who seek Him with all their heart and mind. He will judge the “worthless” who lead out of pride or greed or a desire for influence and power. He will replace them with men and women after His own heart. Even now, He is at work. Perhaps in ways we cannot see. Who knows how many Hannah’s are out there praying for a child? Who knows how many parents are out there who have dedicated their children to the Lord? Who knows how many of those children will rise up in the years ahead to lead us to repentance and revival? God is faithful. He will never abandon or forsake His people. No matter what you are going through, know He is with you.

Readings for tomorrow: [1 Samuel 3-6](#), [Luke 12:35-59](#)

April 14, 2021
NEW HOPE

Readings for today: [1 Samuel 3-6](#), [Luke 12:35-59](#)

With God, there is always hope. As bad as things get, God always preserves a remnant. He will not abandon His chosen people. He will be faithful to His covenant regardless of how His people may or may not respond. As the Book of 1 Samuel begins, the people of Israel are in bad shape. They do not honor God. They do not have leaders who honor God. They are simply going through the motions of worship. Saying all the right things. Making all the right sacrifices. But in their hearts, they reject God. They rebel against His Law. Their priests are a disaster, engaging in sexual immorality. Making a mockery of the sacrificial system. Abusing their spiritual authority. Eli and his sons are the last in the line of the judges. A corrupt time in Israel's history that heartens back to the days of the Great Flood, the Tower of Babel, and slavery in Egypt. But all is not lost because God is still at work! He raises up a new leader. A godly leader. A leader who would seek Him with all their heart and be "blameless" (not perfect) in their generation. Who was this great leader? His name was Samuel.

Noah. Abraham. Moses. God has used each of them in turn to spark revival. Spiritual renewal. To draw God's people back to Himself. Now it's Samuel's turn to take up the mantle of leadership and do the same. Samuel represents a bridge from the time of the Judges to the time of the Kings. He will oversee a major transition in the life of Israel as they go from a bunch of tribes, each with their own identity, to one nation under a strong, centralized monarchy. Another thing that's striking to note is Samuel's age when he receives this call. Noah, Abraham, and Moses were all old men. Well beyond their prime. Samuel is a young boy. Not yet come into his own. The message here? God can use anyone at anytime to accomplish His purposes.

"Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord in the presence of Eli. And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was." (1 Samuel 3:1-3)

Several things stand out in this passage. The Word of the Lord was rare. There was no vision. Eli, the current judge and spiritual leader of Israel, was going blind. All of these are connected and important. As leaders go, so goes a nation. Eli's blindness is not just physical but spiritual as well and it has a devastating impact on the people He leads. Israel was so mired in sin that God had gone almost silent. But even though Eli may be blind, God is not. He sees all. He knows all. We see this dynamic in play throughout the Scriptures...

"For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him." (2 Chronicles 16:9)

"For My eyes are on all their ways. They are not hidden from Me, nor is their iniquity concealed from My eyes." (Jeremiah 16:17)

"And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account." (Hebrews 4:13)

God will not allow His people to persist in their sin. When God's people embrace sin instead of turning to Him in faithfulness, He will withdraw His presence. He will withhold His Word. He will "give them

up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity...give them up to dishonorable passions...give them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.” (Romans 1:24, 26, 28) God is as faithful to judge as He is to forgive. And that is exactly what took place in Israel and in Eli’s own family. Eli failed to discipline and restrain his sons. Hophni and Phineas are the very definition of corrupt religious leaders who manipulate the faith for their own benefit. By the way, we see these same things happening in our world today. I think of the health and wealth preachers who speak to thousands every week. The Christian self-help gurus who masquerade as preachers. The many preachers who have fallen into sin, reject any kind of accountability or spiritual authority or process of repentance, and then get back into the pulpit. As incredible as it seems, faithlessness is often very popular and faithfulness unpopular.

Thankfully, all hope is not lost! The lamp of God had not yet gone out! A young boy lies down in the temple of the Lord ready to receive His Word anew! Note the differences between Eli and Samuel. Eli is old. Infirm. Going blind. Samuel is young. Strong. His eyesight is clear. Eli is alone. Lying down in his own place. Samuel is also alone but makes his bed in the temple to be near the ark of God. Eli is associated in this passage with the rarity of God’s Word and a lack of vision. Samuel is associated with hope because light still flickered in the lamp of God.

“The world has yet to see what God can do with a man (or woman) fully consecrated to him.” (Attributed to Dwight L. Moody) Spiritual revival always begins with one person fully devoting themselves to God. Samuel was set apart from conception to be such a man. His mother gave him to the Lord to be raised in the temple. He was open to hear God’s call when it came. As a result, revival did come to Israel. “And Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the Lord. And the Lord appeared again at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord.” (1 Samuel 3:19-21)

Where do you find yourself in this story? Are you like Eli, Hophi, and Phineas? Enslaved to your sinful desires? Pursuing a life apart from God? Is the Word of the Lord rare in your life? Let me strongly encourage you to go before the Lord in honest, even ruthless, self-examination. Ask God to show you the areas of your life that need to be surrendered. Are you like Samuel? Do you have a heart for God? Let me encourage you to dig deep into His Word. Dedicate daily time in prayer. Listen for God’s voice as it comes to you through His Word or through other believers or through your own personal prayer time. And when He speaks, may you answer with Samuel, “Speak Lord! Your servant is listening.”

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 7-9, Luke 13:1-21

April 15, 2021
WALKING WITH OPEN HANDS

Readings for today: [1 Samuel 7-9](#), [Luke 13:1-21](#)

I am learning to walk with open hands before the Lord. He is reminding me that nothing I possess is actually mine to own. Nothing I've achieved is mine to hold. Nothing I've gained is mine to hoard. Not money. Not influence. Not position. None of it is mine to grasp. Instead, I must release. I must let go. I must walk with open hands and let the Lord fill them with whatever He may will.

Let me illustrate what I mean. When I first graduated from Princeton, I was blessed to be called to a special church in Mobile, AL. The people there embraced me and my family as their own. They loved me well and put up with my crazy ideas. They prayed for me. They challenged me. They accepted me. They followed me. The result was a wonderful six years of fruitful ministry as the Lord blessed the work of our hands. I was then called to plant a church outside of Madison, WI. The experience could not have been more different. I struggled. I suffered. I didn't handle things well. My insecurities and fears rose to the surface and crippled my ability to see beyond myself and my own pain. I was rejected over and over again. I was abused in many ways. Those 19 months almost cost me my marriage. My family. My ministry. Everything I held dear was put at risk. In the wake of those two experiences, close friends asked me if I had misunderstood God's call. If I had heard Him incorrectly. If I had made a mistake in leaving Mobile. The answer is no! As hard as it is to accept, God sometimes calls us to suffer. Sometimes calls us to experiences that are hard and heartbreaking. All to teach us how to walk with open hands.

Think of what we read today from Samuel's story. Here's a man who's served God and His people almost from birth. He was born to lead Israel. Set apart by God for this purpose. His is was a testimony to God's great faithfulness. He's led Israel to great victories. He's led Israel to spiritual revival. For decades, he's gone from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah in order to keep God's people on the right spiritual track. As he got older, he enlisted his sons to help him in his work. Tragically, they did not follow in the faithful footsteps of their father and Samuel's credibility as a leader began to erode. His sons took bribes and perverted justice to the point where the elders of Israel finally came to Samuel and demanded a change. "Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations." But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." And Samuel prayed to the Lord." (1 Samuel 8:5-6) No one likes to hear they are too old. No one likes to hear they are considered to be washed up. No one likes to be fired or let go because they simply don't have what it takes to lead anymore. Samuel is hurt by their words. I imagine all sorts of responses ran through his mind. Perhaps he even had the votes to remain in power if he chose to go that route. But Samuel loved the Lord. Samuel walked with open hands. So instead of reacting in anger, Samuel went to prayer. He took their request and his disappointment to the Lord.

And how did the Lord respond? "And the Lord said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them." (1 Samuel 8:7-9) What an affirmation and yet what deep conviction! You have not been rejected, Samuel. They are rejecting Me. I am sure this grieved Samuel's heart even more. After all, Samuel's greatest desire was for the people to return to the Lord with all their hearts, putting away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among them and directing their hearts to the Lord in order to serve

Him alone. (1 Samuel 7:3) But Samuel obeys the Lord. He gives the people what they desire. He identifies a king for them and humbly relinquishes all his power and authority.

I want so much to be like Samuel. I want to be the kind of person who walks through life with open hands. I want to hold onto the things the Lord brings into my life loosely. I want to place all that I have at His disposal. I want Him to take all my treasure, my time, my talent and use it as He sees fit. I want to be poured out like an offering before the Lord so that at the end of my life I can honestly say I held nothing back but gave everything up in service to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 10-12, Luke 13:22-35

April 16, 2021
THE SPIRIT-FILLED LIFE

Readings for today: [1 Samuel 10-12](#), [Luke 13:22-35](#)

“Then the Spirit of the Lord will rush upon you, and you will prophesy with them and be turned into another man. Now when these signs meet you, do what your hand finds to do, for God is with you.” (1 Samuel 10:6-7)

The people of Israel found themselves in a time of crisis. Samuel, the faithful judge who had led them for so many years, was failing. His sons did not possess the character of their father. It would not be much longer and Israel would have no leader. No spiritual authority. No one to point them to God and protect them from their enemies. So they called for a king. Giving into their fears and anxiety, they asked Samuel to anoint someone to take his place. Someone who would reign and rule over them like the other nations. Someone who would guide and protect them. Someone they could look to in difficult times. God grants Israel’s request. He gives them a king named Saul. A man with great leadership potential. A charismatic leader who can rally Israel and deliver them from their enemies. However, what truly sets Saul apart is the Spirit of the Living God. After Saul meets Samuel and is anointed king, Samuel tells him to expect something miraculous to happen. Saul will actually be changed into a different man by the Holy Spirit. God Himself will rush upon Saul, giving him all he needs to be successful. I love how the Bible describes it, “When Saul turned his back to leave Samuel, God gave him another heart.” (1 Samuel 10:9) Wow. What a gift! All Saul has to do from this point forward is walk in the newness of life he has received and Israel will be saved.

Friends, God is still in the salvation business. God still “rushes” on His people in times of great crisis. He is there to provide when our needs are great and our strength is small. When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit rushes upon us and we are reborn. We are changed into different men and women. We are given new hearts. God empowering and strengthening us for the work He’s called us to in this world. Unlike in the Old Testament where the Spirit of God would come and go on a person, in the New Testament the gift of the Spirit is permanent. God comes to take up residence in our hearts. God comes to dwell with us on a regular basis. God fills us eternally with His very presence. The results are amazing. We are given gifts like wisdom, knowledge, understanding, discernment, boldness, evangelistic zeal, tongues, prophecy, even miracles. The list is endless because God is endless. We are also given great grace to become new people. The fruit of a life lived in humble submission to God is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. Taken together, these gifts and graces become the resources a believer draws on as she/he seeks to serve the world in Jesus’ name.

So far in our reading we’ve encountered some amazing spiritual leaders. Moses. Joshua. Deborah. Gideon. Samuel. All of them filled with God’s Spirit. All of them called to lead God’s people in times of great crisis. All of them given the gifts and graces necessary to do the work God has called them to do. It is tempting as we read the stories of these spiritual heroes and heroines to believe that could never be us. We’re too ordinary. Too weak. Too frail in our faith. It’s tempting to believe our calling is far more mundane. But nothing could be further from the truth! The same Spirit that empowered Moses to split a sea and Joshua to tear down walls and gave Deborah a song of victory to sing is the same Spirit that lives and dwells inside the heart of every true Christian! So in this time of great crisis...as so many live in fear and anxiety of contracting a deadly disease...as so many struggle with lost jobs and lost hopes and lost dreams...as so many feel the isolating effects of social distancing and depression... as so many wrestle with deep grief over those they’ve lost...we have an opportunity to be the hands

and feet of Christ! To offer a comforting word or comforting shoulder in the name of Christ! To point people to the eternal hope they too can have if they place their trust in Christ!

Don't worry about having all the answers! Don't worry about getting everything right! Don't worry about making mistakes! Trust the Spirit to lead you! Trust the Spirit to guide you! Simply "do what your hand finds to do for God is with you!" (1 Samuel 10:7)

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 13-14, Luke 14:1-24

April 17, 2021
WAITING ON GOD

Readings for today: [1 Samuel 13-14](#), [Luke 14:1-24](#)

Recently, I took on the responsibility of taking our two dogs on their daily walk. Frankly, I got tired of the dogs tearing up my house because my teenagers would “forget” to take them. ;-) We go on a three and a half mile track around our neighborhood to wear them out and they love every minute of it. One of my dogs - Dusty - walks the entire time at my side. He never gets ahead. Never lags behind. He’s always in step with me. The other dog - Dusty Jr. - strains at the leash the entire time. He’s constantly pulling to get ahead. Constantly wanting to go his own way. Now, admittedly, DJ is still a puppy. Still learning. But it’s a great lesson for me on how to wait on God. You see, I am too often like DJ. Constantly pulling and straining on God’s leash as I seek to get ahead or go my own way. What I need to learn is how to be like Dusty. I need to learn that the destination is less important than simply being in my Master’s presence.

Saul strains at the leash. He’s anxious. He’s afraid. His people are trembling. They are beginning to desert in droves. Saul’s not sure he can continue to hold things together. He has waited the required seven days. He has done his part. Now is the time for action. Now is the time to make things happen. So he offers the sacrifice. Right as he finishes, Samuel shows up and asks Saul what he has done. Saul’s response is telling. “When I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines had mustered at Michmash, I said, ‘Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the favor of the Lord.’ So I forced myself, and offered the burnt offering.” (1 Samuel 13:11-12) Saul lost faith. Lost faith in himself. Lost faith in Samuel. Ultimately, he lost faith in the Lord. All because he didn’t have the patience to wait on the Lord.

What was Saul’s problem? He saw God as a means to an end. He saw the sacrifice as a means to gain the Lord’s favor which in turn would give him a victory over his enemies. Saul didn’t have a “heart after God.” His heart was for himself. His glory. His power. His authority. His position as king. And that’s why Samuel responds the way he does. “But now your kingdom shall not continue. The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart, and the Lord has commanded him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you.” (1 Samuel 13:14) Samuel could see the selfish nature of Saul’s heart. It was selfishness that ultimately drove Saul’s impatience. It was selfishness that drove him to offer the sacrifice too early. And it was selfishness that cost him the kingdom in the end.

Friends, waiting on God is different than waiting on an outcome or a particular answer to prayer or the fulfillment of a heart’s desire. Those things are not bad in themselves but if we find ourselves growing impatient with God’s timing, it’s most likely because we value the gift over the Giver. We treasure the answer more than the One who graciously hears our prayers. We long for the destination more than we long for the presence of the One who faithfully walks with us every step of the way. So where are you waiting on God today? And are you truly waiting on Him or are you waiting on an answer? Do you find yourself growing impatient? Stop straining at the leash. Relax. Rest. Abide in God’s presence and trust Him to carry you all the way home.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 15-19, Luke 14:25-15:10

April 19, 2021
WHOLE-HEARTED

Readings for today: [1 Samuel 15-19](#), [Luke 14:25-15:10](#)

“Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature...for the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” (1 Sam. 16:7)

What does it mean to love God with a “whole” heart? To live a life fully devoted to Him? Does it depend on physical stature and strength? King Saul literally stood head and shoulders above his countrymen. (1 Sam. 10:23) Eliab, David’s older brother, clearly was an impressive specimen. (1 Sam. 16:6) Does it depend on a track record of achievement and success and wealth and privilege? I’m sure God could easily have lined up a hundred other men who had accomplished a heck of a lot more than David and had the receipts to show for it. What kind of heart does God treasure in a man or woman? The key is found in 1 Sam. 15:22-23...“Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.” Humility. Submission. Obedience. These are the qualities on which God places supreme value. Are we willing to listen? Willing to walk with open hands? Willing to surrender our plans in favor of God’s plan for our lives? Are we willing to trust God even when our circumstances seem bleak? Are we willing to obey even when it’s hard?

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

King David was a whole-hearted man. As we will see as we keep reading, David was a man after God’s own heart. This doesn’t make him perfect. His failures are massive and significant and costly. But through it all, David keeps seeking after God. David keeps humbling himself before God. David keeps returning to God in repentance. And God loves David. Honors David. Promises to give the throne to his descendents for generations.

So time to take stock. Time to step back and honestly examine your own heart. Are you half-hearted or whole-hearted in your devotion to God? Half-hearted or whole-hearted in your love for Jesus? How do you know? We’ve already seen that it doesn’t necessarily depend on our outward appearance or achievement. It can’t be measured by the wealth we accumulate during the course of our lives. We can’t count on the image we project to the world to save us. No, we have to be courageous enough to take the inward journey into the heart. We have to plumb the depths of our soul. We have to plunge deep enough to come face to face with the real person we too often like to keep hidden inside. When we take this journey, who do we find? A man or woman after God’s own heart? A man or woman deeply and fully and completely in love with God? A man or woman of whole-hearted devotion to their Savior? Do we find in our hearts a hunger and thirst for righteousness? A deep awareness of the poverty of our own spiritual condition? Do we grieve over our sin? These are important questions that serve as a “diagnostic” to help us discern the spiritual condition of our hearts.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 20-21, Luke 15:11-32

April 20, 2021
THE GOD OF PRODIGALS AND PHARISEES

Readings for today: [1 Samuel 20-21, Luke 15:11-32](#)

I've read this story a thousand times. The story of the prodigal son is one of my favorites in all the Bible. Probably because I am the prodigal. I've been a drunk. I've engaged in all kinds of lustful behavior. I've been lazy and flunked out of school. I've lied to everyone I love. I've lived a double life. I've been arrogant and prideful. I've been selfish and vain. I've chased money and possessions. I've been blind to my own prejudices and biases. And I wish I could say I've grown beyond such sinful behaviors but the honest truth is they remain, lurking down deep in the depths of my heart.

For years, I believed the answer to my problem lay in self-discipline. After I came to know Christ, I fought hard to change these deep-seated patterns of behavior. I memorized Scripture. I went faithfully to worship every single Sunday. I did my daily quiet time with the Lord. I sought out accountability from my brothers in Christ. I prayed my heart out for God to change me. And I grieved every time I fell into sin. I was judgmental of myself and others. I was quick to condemn people for even the littlest mistakes. It was black or white for me with just about everything. There was so little grace in my life. Looking back, I realize now I had simply flipped to the other side of the coin. I had become a Pharisee. And I wish I could say I've grown beyond such sinful attitudes but the honest truth is they remain, lurking down deep in the depths of my heart.

Then a few years ago, I found myself focusing on the father in this story. I marveled at how he listened without bitterness or resentment or any apparent hurt to his younger son's request. He knew his son was basically telling him he wished he were dead. He knew fulfilling his younger son's request would impoverish the family. He knew what it would cost to let his younger son go and still he shows him grace. I marveled as well at his treatment of the older son. The one who did everything right. The one who remained faithful on the outside but on the inside was burning up with anger and hatred. He knew what it would cost if his older son refused to embrace his brother. He knew how it would impoverish the family and threaten their future together. And still he shows him grace. I marveled yet more at how the father runs to both his sons. Meeting them where they were at. Refusing to be separated from them in their shame. He embraces each of them in turn. Reaffirming his love for them. Reaffirming their place in the family. He simply will not let them go.

Friends, true freedom is not found in chasing every desire. True freedom is not found in exercising strict self-control. True freedom can only be found in the Father's love. It is His love and grace that sets us free. It is His Son who breaks the power of sin in our lives through His death on the cross. And it is His Spirit who goes to work transforming us from the inside out. No matter where you find yourself today - playing the Prodigal or the Pharisee - may you place your trust in the God who loves them both with all His heart.

Readings for tomorrow: [Samuel 22-23, Luke 16:1-13](#)

April 22, 2021
LETTING GO

Readings for today: [1 Samuel 24-26](#), [Luke 16:14-31](#)

Imagine having everything you ever wanted within your grasp? Position. Power. Peace. You have the opportunity with a single stroke to bring it about. Imagine spending your life defending yourself against injustice. On the run for crimes you did not commit. Falsely accused by your enemy. And now you have the chance to end it. All you have to do is take matters into your own hands. A sudden strike in the darkness and you could lay hold of all God had promised.

The temptation to bring about the will of God in our own way and own time is very real. David faced it in the cave when Saul came in to relieve himself. Jesus faced it in the wilderness when the enemy offered him all the kingdoms of the world without the cross. You and I face it everyday as well in big and small ways. Yes, we know the will of God for our lives. We know His Word. We know His Truth. We know His Law. We know what He desires for us. But we get impatient. We get frustrated. We get anxious. We get afraid. And in our fear, we take matters into our own hands.

I remember vividly sitting down at a coffee shop one morning in Sun Prairie, WI. Kristi and I had been seeking God's will for many months. God had led us to resign from a difficult and painful ministry position. He had led us to a great church family who welcomed us in to help us heal. He had provided a sixty day severance package that we lived on while we waited for Him to reveal what was next. Through a mutual friend, God had connected us to a church in Parker, CO that was just beginning their search for a new senior pastor. But these things take time and I was growing anxious. I was afraid. The church in Parker was literally my only job prospect. I had no other options. How would I feed my family if it fell through? How would I pay the rent? Was my career in ministry over? Was it time to go do something else? All these thoughts ran through my head as the weeks passed and the wheels of the search process slowly turned. I was getting about two to three hours of sleep a night. I would pace the hours away praying and crying out to God.

One Saturday evening, I made up my mind. Enough was enough. I needed to expand my search. I needed to look at other ministry positions. I needed more options. So I told Kristi I would start looking the next morning. She and I went to bed. She tossed and turned all night, suffering from the sudden onset of a migraine. I did my normal pacing routine. We were both deeply unsettled. Eventually, morning dawned. I showered. Got dressed. Headed over to the coffee shop, laptop in hand to begin my day. I ordered my regular cup of black coffee. Sat down at my favorite table. Opened up the browser on my computer. Just as I went to type, I heard the word "NO" in my mind. It was clear. It was loud. It was startling. I looked around. Shook my head. Went to type. Again came the word..."NO!" This time I jumped a little. I looked around again. No one else was in the shop. Just me and the barista who was in the back. So I tried a third time to type. "NO!" I sat back. I looked out the window. I knew it was the Lord. Calling me to trust. Calling me to be patient. Calling me to wait on Him to reveal His will rather than make my own plans. I called Kristi. Told her what had happened. Told her God wasn't allowing me to apply to any other positions and that we just needed to wait for Him to reveal what would happen with the church in Parker. Immediately she felt the pain from her migraine lift and relief flood her body. It remains one of the most incredible moments in our lives.

God's ways are not our ways. All of us would have counseled David to take Saul's life in the cave that day. Put an end to the running. Put an end to the civil war. Kill your enemy and take your rightful place on the throne of Israel. All of us would have counseled Jesus to avoid the cross. To accept the deal the

devil was offering. Accomplish all the Father has sent You to do without the suffering and pain. We all compromise. We all rationalize. We all have our excuses for why we don't follow the will of God. Why we don't walk in His ways. Why we don't wait on His timing. The reality is we are always looking out for number one. We are always looking out for our own interests first before we look to the interests of others. Even God. But David was a man after God's own heart. He refused to take matters into his own hands. He refused to lift his hand against the Lord's anointed even though Saul was an evil and corrupt king. He trusted all God had promised would be fulfilled in God's time and in God's way. Just like Jesus did in the wilderness. Just like Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Friends, take a step back. Take your hands off the wheel. Relinquish control. Let go. Trust God to fulfill His promises in His perfect timing and according to His perfect will.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 27-29, Luke 17:1-19

April 23, 2021
SERVANT-MINDED

Readings for today: [1 Samuel 27-29](#), [Luke 17:1-19](#)

I remember driving back from a weekend getaway in Boston with Kristi when it hit me. We had been married for three or four years. We had our ups and downs as we tried to figure out life together. Things got more challenging because of a heartbreaking pregnancy loss and a cross-country move. We were generally happy but I think we both felt like our relationship could be so much more. I remember looking over at Kristi as she slept in the seat next to me. I remember asking the Lord what I could do to make our marriage truly great. God gave me one word, “serve.” Serve her with all your heart and with all your might. Make it your goal in life to support, encourage, and empower her to be a strong woman of faith. Don’t be the stumbling block. Don’t let the temptation to be selfish get a foothold. When she’s hurting, drop everything to comfort her. When she’s angry and lashes out, let it all go and forgive her. When she succeeds, celebrate her for all she’s worth. Something changed in me that day. My attitude shifted. My perspective changed. And our marriage has only gotten better and better over the years. All because I dedicated my life to serve.

In the reading from Luke’s Gospel today, Jesus is teaching His disciples a similar lesson. They are never to put a stumbling block in anyone’s way. They are never to let their anger, their frustration, their selfishness, their desires tempt those around them to sin. They are to forgive easily and often. They are to serve faithfully and selflessly. I love the disciple’s response...“Increase our faith!”...because it was mine that day in the car! How else could it happen? How else could I become the husband I needed to be? I’m only human after all. Of course, so were the disciples. Broken by sin just like all of us. Subject to the same temptations and pressures and anxiety that everyone else feels. They are not supermen. They have no spiritual superpowers. They do not have the strength or wisdom to be able to do what Jesus is calling them to do. So they cry out for more faith. More faith to believe. More faith to live. More faith to be the servants Jesus was calling them to be.

All of us need such faith if we are to serve. For it is only by faith that we can let go of our need for recognition. Our need to have our desires fulfilled. Our need to have our own needs met. True servant-mindedness and servant-heartedness lets go of these things. The true servant understands they are simply doing their duty. Doing what’s expected. They find joy in the act of service for they know they are serving a Master greater than themselves. Jesus is both Master and Servant. He came not to be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many. He refused to use His power and authority in demanding or coercive ways. He refused to repay evil for evil. In short, He never put a stumbling block in anyone’s way. He forgave easily and often. He served faithfully and selflessly all the way to the end of His life. And He didn’t need any recognition for it. He simply embraced it as His role in His Father’s divine plan.

Jesus expects the same servant-mindedness from His disciples. He expects us to cultivate a servant’s heart in every relationship in life. He expects us to give away our lives in service to others. And this, indeed, will take faith. More faith than we can ever muster on our own. It will take faith to work for no earthly rewards. Faith to set aside any earthly desire to be recognized for all we do. Faith to trust Jesus with all our needs. It takes faith to work for no other affirmation than to hear those words from Him at the end of our lives, “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master.”

Readings for tomorrow: [1 Samuel 30-31](#), [Luke 17:20-37](#)

April 24, 2021
EPITAPH

Readings for today: [1 Samuel 30-31](#), [Luke 17:20-37](#)

My dad's family comes from a small town in western Nebraska. If you go to the cemetery there, you will find all my relatives going back several generations. Grossbachs. Reslers. Arenz's. They're all there. You'll see a headstone for my son Caleb and the plots where Kristi and I will be buried as well. It's a beautiful, peaceful place. Every time we go back to Wauneta, we make sure we go out to visit. We walk among our ancestors. We read their names. Birthdates. Deathdates. And ponder the legacy they've left for us.

In the final analysis, what message will your life send? What will be written about you after you die? What memories will your children and grandchildren hold onto? How will they speak of you? King Saul ruled Israel for a number of years. He started off well but quickly went off track. His life is one of half-measures. A part of him tries so hard to be faithful to God but a greater part keeps taking matters into his own hands. His fear gets the best of him on so many occasions. And now we read about his death. A horrible one. You can almost see him on top of Mt. Gilboa. Wounded. Pierced through by many arrows. The bodies of his sons lying on the ground around him. He's in pain. Agony. Grief-stricken. Israel has fallen before the Philistines. The glory of the Lord has departed. He's watching it all come crashing down around him and in his despair, he asks his armor-bearer to finish him off before his enemies come and torture him. His armor-bearer refuses so Saul falls on his own sword.

What verdict does the Bible render about this man's life? "So Saul died for his breach of faith. He broke faith with the Lord in that he did not keep the command of the Lord, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance. He did not seek guidance from the Lord. Therefore the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse." (1 Chronicles 10:13-14) Saul's death did not come at the hands of the Philistines. Not ultimately. His fate was sealed when he broke faith with God. When he did not wait all those years ago for Samuel to come and make the right sacrifices. From that point forward, Saul was doomed to perish and every action he took to stave off his fate only served to seal it further. Seeking out the witch of Endor was simply the final straw that broke the camel's back. Saul no longer sought God. No longer pursued God. No longer loved God. And so God put him to death and gave the kingdom to David.

So back to us? What will future generations say about you when you're gone? The writers of the Chronicles were looking back at their history. They looked back at their leaders and they judged them primarily based on their fidelity to the Lord. Good leadership looked to Yahweh. Evil leadership looked to other gods. A good life was one defined by faithfulness to God. An evil life was one defined by selfishness, greed, and the worship of idols. Saul will forever be remembered by his epitaph in 1 Chronicles 10:13-14. David will forever be remembered as the "man after God's own heart." What legacy are you leaving behind?

Readings for tomorrow: None

April 26, 2021
THE SECRET TO PRAYER

Readings for today: [2 Samuel 1-5](#), [Luke 18:1-19:10](#)

I was recently talking to a friend about a situation they are facing in their life right now. It is hard. It is challenging. It is heartbreaking. It has to do with someone they love and the challenges they face. And my friend asked me how they should pray. You see, they are mad at God right now. Frustrated by the unjust treatment of the one they love. They want to know why God seems silent in the face of their fears. Why won't He answer the deepest cries of their hearts?

It's a common experience. As believers in Jesus Christ, we find our hearts breaking for the world around us. It is full of so much depression. So much despair. So much disease. So much injustice. Tensions are high. Divisions are many. Distrust is the rule of the day. Natural disasters like hurricanes, cyclones, drought, and famine cause terrible suffering. Violence and wars rage around the globe and often in our own backyards. Our lives are touched by tragedy. We cannot escape it. And so we pray. We come before God. We lay our burdens before Him. We cry out to Him in the midst of our grief. We beg Him to act. We rage at Him when He seems silent and distant. We wonder why He won't hear us? Why He won't answer us? Why He won't respond to ease the suffering of those we love?

In today's reading, Jesus teaches us about prayer. Three things, He says, you need when you come before God in prayer. Starting at the end of the passage and working our way back to the beginning, Jesus calls us to pray like children. "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." (Luke 18:17) Children often don't have the big picture. They often can't understand the decisions of their parents. If your kids are like my kids, they often say things like, "I don't understand why things have to be this way." But as their father, I know better. I often know what they need even before they ask. I know their hearts. I know their fears. I know their struggles. I know what's good for them even if they don't know it themselves. We need to pray with the attitude and perspective of a child. Our Heavenly Father knows best. He knows what He's doing. He has a plan and it is good.

Second, we pray with humility. "But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:13-14) We are sinners. We are broken. Our view of the world is warped. Our understanding of life is corrupt. Our feelings cannot be trusted. We do not place our faith in our own understanding. We do not place our faith in our own pride and privilege. We do not place our faith in our own wisdom and strength. Instead, we come before God on our knees. We bow before His wisdom and understanding. In all our ways, we acknowledge His Lordship and we trust Him to make our paths straight. He is gracious. He is merciful. He is steadfast in His love and faithfulness.

Finally, we pray with persistence. "And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" (Luke 18:3-5) God invites us not just to knock politely on the door to the throne room of heaven but to literally beat it down! We come before God continually. Constantly bringing our requests before Him. He never tires of hearing our needs. Never tires of listening to the desires of our hearts. Never falls asleep. Never gets bored. Never

takes a break. Never slams the door in our face. He simply embraces us. Pulls us into His lap. He draws near to us when we are broken hearted and crushed in spirit. He is with us in the darkest of times to bring comfort and peace. And often in the fullness of time. According to His perfect will. An answer is waiting.

I want to encourage you in prayer today, friends. Do not relent. Do not let go. Do not let up. Stay persistent. Come before your God humbly. With the faith of a child. And trust your Heavenly Father is good and has your best in mind.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 6-8, Luke 19:11-27

April 27, 2021
UNLESS THE LORD BUILDS THE HOUSE...

Readings for today: [2 Samuel 6-8](#), [Luke 19:11-27](#)

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.” (Psalms 127:1)

One of the things I struggle with the most is my desire to be successful. To make my life count. To do something significant. To strive to be the best. These values were ingrained in me from an early age. They are not necessarily bad in and of themselves. The problem is I too often let these good things become ultimate things in my life. I start to pursue success at the expense of my relationship with God or those I love. I focus on the future rather than find contentment in the present. I covet what I don't have rather than be thankful for what I do have.

Several years ago, the Lord spoke to me during a time of prayer. It wasn't an audible voice or a lightning bolt from heaven or anything like that. It was simply an impression in my heart. A feeling in my gut. A few random thoughts in my head that suddenly coalesced into a message I needed to hear. It was a short message. Three simple words. Obscurity. Anonymity. Insignificance. I was journaling and these three words started ringing over and over again in my head. Obscurity. Anonymity. Insignificance. Over the years I've learned to pay attention to these kinds of things in my prayer time so I sat back from my keyboard and asked the Lord to give me further insight into what He was saying. God said, “I want you to labor in obscurity. Embrace anonymity. Pursue insignificance.” To be honest, my first thought was, “Wait a minute! That doesn't sound right! That's not who I am! Frankly, it sounds unAmerican!” God's answer? “Exactly.” :-)

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.” King David had a desire to build God a house. It was a godly desire. A good desire. One affirmed by Nathan the prophet. But it was not the Lord's will. “But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan, "Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the Lord: Would you build me a house to dwell in?...' Thus says the Lord of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.” (2 Samuel 7:4-5, 8-13) I love how God flips the tables on David here. It is not David who will build God a house but God who will build David a house! It is not David who will make His own name great but God who will make David's name great!

Unless God builds the house. Unless God builds David's house. Unless God builds our house. We all labor in vain. This was the message God was sending me during my devotional time. I was spending so much energy working hard to be successful. To stand out among my peers. To be faithful to God. And all the while God was calling me to rest. To trust. To stand back and let Him do the “building” of my life. Let Him guide and direct my path. Let Him have the glory for the success I was seeking to achieve.

Since that time, I've continued to learn. Continued to grow. Continued to grasp on ever-deepening levels the meaning of those God-given words for my life.

Obscurity - I labor in a small town overshadowed by a big city. I work in a church on the eastern edge of that town off the beaten track. The church I serve is growing but we'll never top the Outreach 100 list. We're making an impact locally and globally but no one will ever write us up in the history books. We're just an ordinary group of people seeking to serve God and love each other well.

Anonymity - I am released from the pressure to perform. To succeed. To self-promote. No one knows my name. This work isn't about me. I love the fact that I don't always have to be up front. Don't always have to preach. Don't always have to be in charge. I am simply one of God's many servants at my church.

Insignificance - I am deeply aware of how truly insignificant my contributions to the Kingdom of God are in the grand scheme of things. The reality is I will be completely forgotten within a generation or so of my death. My own family won't remember who I was or what I did. All my accomplishments and achievements will quickly turn to dust. And that's okay. Because my significance is not found in what I do but in who God is and I am content simply to serve Him in whatever way He sees fit.

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Where do you need to step back and let God build in your life? In what areas do you need to hand over the tools, stop working so hard, and let God take over? Whose blueprint are you operating from? Yours or God's?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 9-11, Luke 19:28-48

April 28, 2021
AMAZING GRACE

Readings for today: [2 Samuel 9-11](#), [Luke 19:28-48](#)

There's a famous story told about John Knox, the founder of Presbyterianism in Scotland. He had a nightmare as he lay dying. When he awoke, he told all his friends that he had just been tempted to believe he had earned heaven through the faithfulness of his life and ministry. But he quickly followed that up with these words, "Blessed be God who enabled me to quench the fiery dart, by suggesting to me such passages of Scripture as these; "What hast thou that thou didst not receive?" (1 Cor. 4:7) "By the grace of God I am what I am." (1 Cor. 15:10a) "Not I but the grace of God which was with me." (1 Cor. 15:10b)

It is so easy to think we deserve God's grace. It's so easy to believe we've done enough. We're good enough. We're strong enough. We've worked hard enough. Yes, most of know the dictionary definition of grace - "unmerited favor" - but if we're honest, deep down we like to think we deserve it. If you don't believe me, take a moment and consider how much we tend to take God's grace for granted. How little we value our time with Him. How easy it is for us to prioritize other things. Think about how hard it is for us to forgive those who hurt us. Reconcile broken relationships. Extend grace to others. Think about how easy it is for us to play the critic. To assume the worst rather than the best of others. Become angry or dismissive toward those with whom we disagree politically, socially, or spiritually. Yes, grace is a hard concept for us to grasp much less live out on a daily basis.

In today's reading, we come face to face with a marvelous example of grace in the story of David and Mephibosheth. David is now king. He has the nation firmly united behind him. He is winning battle after battle. Expanding their territory. Gaining tribute. Philistines. Moabites. Syrians. Edomites. All fall before him. Most ancient near east kings, in their efforts to consolidate power, would seek out the last surviving members of the former royal family and have them put to death. After all, you do not want to give any of your enemies a potential rival to rally behind. Not David. David remembers his covenant with Jonathan. David remembers his promise to Saul. He seeks out the last surviving members of Saul's family in order to honor them. Bless them. Extend grace to them.

Enter Mephibosheth. Crippled. Weak. Broken. Living in abject poverty - Lo-debar literally means "no pasture" - where he has fled to hide. For years, he has eked out an existence hoping to escape the notice of the new king. He knows what would likely happen should he be found out. But now he's been betrayed. His location is known. The king's soldiers show up to bring him before David. One can imagine his fear. One can imagine all the nightmare scenarios running through his head. He comes before David and bows his face to the floor at his feet. He begs for mercy though he knows he doesn't deserve it. And what's David's response? Grace.

Friends, we are Mephibosheth. We are crippled. Weak. Broken. We too live in abject spiritual poverty. We too have fled to hide from the King. Many of us have lived this way for years. Putting our heads down and barely eking out an existence. Enslaved to our sin, we tried as best we could to escape God's notice. But the Holy Spirit sees all and knows all. He found us out! He sought us out! He brought us before the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! Perhaps you remember the day that happened? The first day you actually humbled yourself before Jesus? I remember it well. I remember the exact spot I was standing on the campus of the University of Colorado in Boulder. I remember feeling the full weight of my sin for the first time. I remember the sense of despair I felt at the way my life was going. I remember how unworthy I felt before the Lord as I prayed to accept Him into my life. And what I

remember most of all is feeling utterly overwhelmed as His grace washed over me. For the first time in my life, I knew things would be okay. I knew I was loved with an everlasting love. I knew I was not alone. My heart, once so dry and empty, was immediately filled with joy and peace. It was amazing.

Friends, grace has nothing to do with us. Nothing to do with what we've done. Nothing to do with how good we think ourselves to be. It has everything to do with God. By showering us with grace, God is being faithful to Himself. Faithful to the covenant promises He has made. Grace takes the wounded, crippled, and broken and sets a place for them at God's table. Grace seeks out the spiritually disabled, those lost and wandering in darkness, enslaved to sin, dead in their trespasses and presents them before God. Grace goes to the most barren places, rescues the spiritually poor, and brings them to a place of plenty, where we are fed with the richest of fare. Most of all, grace takes those orphaned by sin and adopts them into God's own family!

Now here's what we most often miss about grace. It doesn't take away our brokenness. Mephibosheth remained crippled for the rest of his life. In the same way, we too remain crippled by our sinful nature. Why does God allow this? Again, the answer is grace. As Mephibosheth limped around the palace, leaning on his crutches, he was reminded over and over again of the amazing grace of the king. As you and I continue our struggle with sin. Tempted. Afflicted. Oppressed. We are being reminded over and over again of the amazing grace of our own King. That takes a wretch like me. Once lost. Now found. Once blind but now can see.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 12-14, Luke 20:1-26

April 29, 2021
HYPOCRISY

Readings for today: [2 Samuel 12-14](#), [Luke 20:1-26](#)

Hypocrisy killed my grandmother. Her life was one for the history books. Literally. Widowed at a very young age with three young children, she moved them all from a small farming town in western Nebraska to Switzerland to live for two years. She traveled all over Europe during that time. Her kids learned multiple languages as well as how to ski in the Alps. When they came back home, she settled back in. Ran the family farm. Eventually remarried and added three more kids to the mix. One of them died at age 18. She lost her second husband during open heart surgery. Once the kids were out of the house, she pursued her nurses' license. Studied a foreign language herself. She literally never stopped moving. However, the grief in her life eventually caught up to her and she looked for a way to ease her pain and guilt. Tragically, she got caught up in a cult. They convinced her to give them her land and her wealth. They convinced her to move to California. Her relationships with her children became strained. Right before the end of her life, the cult leader died. His successors publicly repented of their ways. They let all their followers know they intentionally been deceitful. My grandmother's heart broke. She realized what she had done. She had acted against some of her most deeply held convictions. She literally spent hours writing in every book she owned, "Esther is a hypocrite." I remember talking to her towards the end of her life, attempting to win her back to Christ. She and I talked about forgiveness. We talked about unconditional love. We talked about God dying for all our sin and guilt and shame. We talked about the power of the Holy Spirit to renew and cleanse and make us whole again. I still remember the day she called the house. I picked up the phone. All she said was, "Doug, you're right." (She had significant dementia by this point.) And then she hung up. It was the last time I spoke to her. I will remain forever grateful to the Lord for those final words because I know she had finally let go of the shame she felt over her hypocrisy and accepted the grace of God into her life.

Hypocrisy always leads to death. For David, it led to the tragic death of his infant child. It led the death of the peace and prosperity and unity of his reign. David was nothing before he met God. He was a shepherd in a field of a small backwater town that barely appeared on a map. Everything David achieved was because of God. Everything David now owned came from God's own hand. All his victories. All his success. All his wealth and power and privilege. All of it came from God. But it wasn't enough. David betrayed his deepest convictions when he raped Bathsheba. He compounded his crimes when he ordered the murder of Uriah. He sealed his fate when he attempted to cover up his sin. So God sends him a prophet. Nathan confronts David. Forces him to face the consequences of his hypocrisy. Thankfully, David repents. "For thus says the Lord...you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun." David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die." (2 Samuel 12:12-13) But it is too late for his household. He has sown the wind and will reap the whirlwind. Civil war. Exile. The death of so many of his children.

Hypocrisy is the reason our nation is dying. I forced myself to watch all the speeches last night from both parties. Once again, I was bitterly disappointed. It's astounding to me how many of our political leaders twist one another's words to further their own agendas. They refuse to share any credit. They assume the absolute worst of those on the other side of the aisle. They do not act in good faith. In some cases, they simply outright lie. And the lack of integrity is tragically bipartisan. As such, they betray the very oaths they took when they raised their right hand and promised to do what is best for our country.

Hypocrisy is the reason the church in America is dying. Far too many priests and pastors abuse their positions of spiritual authority in all sorts of ways. The widespread scandal of sexual abuse of the most vulnerable in congregations is horrifying. The spiritual abuse of the people they serve is more subtle but just as destructive. The lure of celebrity is seemingly too hard to resist. The opportunity to leverage one's position to accumulate great wealth and power and cultural influence is too tempting for many. Add to that an inability to humbly confront our own sinful legacies of pride and hate and is it any wonder so many are leaving the faith?

Hypocrisy is the reason I am dying on some level. Every time I betray my own deeply held convictions, I reminded of how easy it is for me to play the hypocrite. Every time I fail to serve my wife. Fail to honor my children. Fail to listen to those who are hurting in my own congregation. Every time I fail to assume the best of my critics. Fail to love those who are hard for me to love. Fail to pray for my enemies. I too am "that man" that Nathan talks about. And I would be lost indeed without my Savior Jesus Christ. He alone is faithful. He alone is steadfast. He alone is true. He is my Rock and my Redeemer. And His grace is enough. It was enough for my grandmother. It was enough for King David. It is enough for you. It is enough for me. It is enough for the church. It is enough for our nation. It is even enough for the world. Thanks be to God.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 15-16, Luke 20:27-47

April 30, 2021
THE TRAGEDY OF UNFORGIVENESS

Readings for today: [2 Samuel 15-16](#), [Luke 20:27-47](#)

There are consequences when we fail to forgive from the heart. Consequences when we fail to reconcile. Consequences when we fail to follow God's will and seek to restore broken relationships. The impact of those consequences tend to be commensurate with the authority and power and influence we wield. So a parent who refuses to take this step with their child can impact future generations. An employer who refuses to take this step with employees can cost a company. A pastor who refuses to take this step with her/his congregation can disrupt a congregation.

David was a king. A man who held the power of life and death in his hands. A man whose authority was supreme and final. The impact of his decisions impacted not just him or his household but a nation. This is true not only in the Absalom narrative but also at other times in David's life. There is a ripple effect to the decisions he makes. When he makes good and godly decisions, the nation is blessed. When he makes poor and ungodly decisions, the nation is cursed. As we read yesterday, David's refusal to execute justice when his daughter Tamar was raped creates a crisis in his family that eventually spreads to the nation. Absalom takes matters into his own hands leading to his exile. David brings him back but refuses to forgive him from the heart and restore him to his place. In his isolation, Absalom's bitterness grows and it leads him to conspire to steal the kingdom. David seems blissfully unaware as Absalom executes his carefully laid plans. He's almost caught completely by surprise when the news finally comes and he has to flee for his life. The ripples grow as allegiances shift and new alliances are formed. Ahithophel sides with Absalom. Hushai with David. Joab goes with David so Absalom makes Amasa his new general. Abiathar and Zadok stay in Jerusalem as priests but remain loyal to David. Shimei curses David. Ziba makes his move to take over what's left of the household of Saul. Everyone, it seems, is looking out for themselves. Such is the chaos that happens when forgiveness and reconciliation are ignored. It leads to all kinds of brokenness, suffering, and pain.

We've all probably had this experience. A friend says something or does something that hurts us. We refuse to forgive. Now the rest of our friends are forced to choose sides. A marriage breaks up. Divorce papers are signed. Once again, friends and family feel forced to take sides. A business deal goes south. Partners split up. Lawyers are called to divide up the assets. Clients and customers are pressured to shift their loyalties. Seasons of ministry come to an end. Pastors are let go. Forced out in some cases. Congregations split. Such experiences are painful and never easy. Too many of us take the path of least resistance which is avoidance. Abandoning the relationships we once enjoyed because forgiveness is too hard. Reconciliation too much. The way of Jesus too difficult.

And yet, Jesus' words continue to haunt us... "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us... For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matthew 6:12, 14-15) "Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18:21-22) "And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." (Mark 11:25)

Friends, forgiveness and reconciliation are **ESSENTIAL** to the Christian life. Coming to terms with our brothers and sisters is **REQUIRED** by Jesus if we are to call ourselves His disciples. We are not given

any other options. Any other choices. Jesus wants His family to be unified not just in name but from the heart. Think of the pain that could have been avoided had David listened to God. Think of the pain in our own lives that could be avoided if only we would listen to God. Who is Jesus calling you to forgive today?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 17-18, Luke 21:1-19