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October 1, 2021
Christian Freedom

Readings for today: [Isaiah 10-12](#), [Galatians 5](#)

Galatians is the manifesto for Christian freedom. The freedom we have in Christ. The freedom Christ won for us on the cross. Without Jesus, we are enslaved. Enslaved to our sinful desires. Enslaved to our corrupt thoughts and feelings. Enslaved to the ways of this world. Enslaved by the enemy of this world. It's why when we look at the world around us, we see such pain. It's why human beings are often so hurtful. So abusive. So evil. It's why man's inhumanity to man often knows no boundaries. Paul knew this. He had experienced this. Before Christ set him free, he was enslaved to his own passions and desires. He persecuted the church. Celebrated their pain and suffering. Rejoiced in their deaths. He relentlessly pursued them. Chased them down. Drag them from their homes and families. He was the chief of sinners. But then Christ came into his life and he was set free. So this freedom of which he speaks is not an abstract concept for him. It is something he experienced deeply, viscerally, and powerfully.

It's why he's so concerned for his Galatian friends. He is in anguish over what is happening to them. Having been set free by Christ, they are submitting themselves again to the yoke of slavery. Having begun so well in the Spirit, they are again seeking to ground their identity in something other than Jesus. Having been saved by grace through the gift of faith, they are now turning to their own work for justification. How often do we make the same mistake as Christians?

So how can we guard our hearts and minds from falling into this trap? Paul lays it out for us in the readings for today. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1) A great verse to memorize and meditate on. A great verse to remind yourself of when you start to feel the pull of temptation. A great verse to cling to when you feel trapped or defeated or depressed or anxious or afraid. You have been set free! Christ has accomplished all you need! Simply stand in this freedom. Rest in this freedom. Trust this freedom and do not return to the old ways of slavery.

"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." (Galatians 5:13) Our world doesn't understand true freedom. The freedom it offers is an unfettered freedom. A freedom without boundaries. A freedom without restraint. A freedom centered ultimately on the gratification of our own selfish desires. This is not Christian freedom, friends! It is a lie from the pit of hell! It is the path back into slavery! Christian freedom results in service to God and to one another. Christian freedom means offering our lives back to God and to His people. It is a freedom constrained by love. A freedom bounded by grace. A freedom fettered by faith in the Son of God who gave Himself up for us. This is the freedom we were called to in Christ.

And we gain this freedom as we walk by the Spirit. "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." (Galatians 5:16) As we surrender our lives to the Spirit and His sanctifying work, we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. We will stand firm and resist the yoke of slavery. We will refuse to go back to the old ways of living. "If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit." (Galatians 5:25) As we keep in step with Spirit - through daily prayer and Bible study and weekly worship with God's people - we will find our lives being transformed. Our awareness of the depth and the breadth of the freedom we have in Christ will grow. Our experience of

God's presence will deepen. Our desire to love and serve both God and His people will increase. This is what Paul hopes and prays for his Galatian friends and it is my prayer for all of us as well.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 13-15, Galatians 6

October 2, 2021
The Danger of Self-Promotion

Readings for today: [Isaiah 13-15](#), [Galatians 6](#)

There may not be anything more dangerous to our mental health than self-promotion. Recently, Facebook completed an internal study of the impact of Instagram especially on teenage girls. The results were not good. 1 in 5 girls reported Instagram makes them feel worse about themselves. 32.4% of them reported Instagram made them feel worse about their bodies specifically. Significant percentages reported increased rates of anxiety and depression as well. This squares with an earlier finding in Britain that measured the impact of mental health across all social media platforms. All of them reported similar increases in rates of anxiety, depression, and even physical illness. The greater the usage, the greater the impact. So here's the big question...why? What is it about social media that drives us to despair? Social media is literally designed to create a self-reinforcing feedback loop. It activates the brain's "reward" center by releasing dopamine with every "like" or "follow" or engagement. As such, it becomes addictive and like all addictions, you rapidly reach the point of diminishing returns. Simply put, you find yourself craving more and needing more to get the same dopamine effect. The results of the study show that - consciously or subconsciously - people are using social media to boost their self-esteem. Polish their self-image. Promote themselves and their accomplishments. They do this to create a greater sense of belonging in their social circle. When their posts receive a lot of attention, the pleasure centers in their brain fire up. Dopamine is released. They feel great. When their posts go unnoticed or are seemingly ignored, the pleasure centers of their brains remain dormant. Dopamine is not released. And just like any addict, when they are denied what they crave, they grow anxious and depressed.

This is not a new problem. Human beings have been struggling with this issue from the beginning. There is something innate within us that craves attention. We long to be recognized. Long to be loved and admired and respected. Call it pride. Call it arrogance. Call it the "idol of Self." It is rooted deep within our sinful nature and it is impossible to resist. We see a great example of it from our reading today in Isaiah. "How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit. Those who see you will stare at you and ponder over you: 'Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities, who did not let his prisoners go home?' All the kings of the nations lie in glory, each in his own tomb; but you are cast out, away from your grave, like a loathed branch, clothed with the slain, those pierced by the sword, who go down to the stones of the pit, like a dead body trampled underfoot. You will not be joined with them in burial, because you have destroyed your land, you have slain your people." (Isaiah 14:12-20)

Traditionally, we believe this passage has a double-meaning. In human terms, it refers to the Babylonian king. The man who set himself up as ruler of the world. The man who believed himself to be greater than any human or god. He set up images of himself. He demanded to be worshipped. He clearly attempted to claim a position that was not his own. In spiritual terms, we also see this as a reference to Satan. Lucifer. The devil. An angel who once lived with God in glory but fell through pride and arrogance as he sought to usurp God's throne. Regardless of what interpretive stance you hold - and it is possible to believe both - they end with the same result. Those who exalt themselves are brought low. Those who promote themselves are cast down. Those who seek to raise themselves

through pride and arrogance to a lofty status end up falling on their faces. They become the subject of derision. They are quickly cast aside and forgotten.

We see it in our own world all the time. How many celebrities rise and fall? How many social influencers come and go? How many politicians get their fifteen minutes of fame? Those with any kind of staying power often have to resort to greater and greater acts of self-promotion in order to remain relevant. They become attention-seekers in order not to be forgotten. It's shameless and often borders on the absurd. By the way, I see the same thing happening with pastors. The pursuit of platform and performance and self-promotion over faithfulness and a long obedience in the same direction. It's why so many fall into sin. It's why so many fall into temptation. They are driven to create content. Driven to create a buzz. Driven by their success to create greater success. All defined by numbers reached. Butts in the seats. Online views. Books published. Conferences invited to. You name it. They become an industry unto themselves. But such fame is fleeting. Such attention is not good for the soul. The pressure to perform is too much which is why so many crater at the end.

So what's the answer? I think the Apostle Paul sums it up well, "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." (Galatians 6:14) The only Person we should be platforming is Jesus. His is the only name under heaven by which we might be saved and therefore His is the only Name we should be promoting to the world. A famous saint once said, "Preach the gospel, die, and be forgotten." That sounds about right to me. At the end of the day...if my life is to count for anything...may it be because I pointed people beyond myself to Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: None

October 4, 2021
The Sovereignty of God

Readings for today: [Isaiah 16-20](#), [Ephesians 1-2](#)

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...” (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

I think of this verse every time I read through the prophets. On the one hand, God is bringing His righteous judgment against a people who have forgotten Him. A people who have earned their fate by bringing shame upon themselves and their communities and their nations through their actions. Cush shall be cut off. Egypt shall fall. Babylon will be destroyed. The desert tribes of the Kedar scattered. Not even God’s chosen people will be spared as Jerusalem is laid low. At the same time, there are signs of future hope. In a stunning display of grace and mercy, God reaches out to the enemies of His people and draws them close. “And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them...In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance." (Isaiah 19:21, 23-25) There truly is a time for everything under heaven!

One of the keys to understanding and interpreting the prophetic texts is to try to place yourself in Isaiah’s shoes. He is the court prophet. A godly politician. A man who is familiar with world events. He speaks to kings and princes and the rulers of his day. He knows the intricate plans they’ve laid. He knows the complex challenges they face. He knows the struggles and hardships and burdens that come along with leading a nation at a time when one is surrounded by far more powerful neighbors to the north (Assyria), to the east (Babylon), and to the south (Egypt). Israel has always sat at the crossroads of the Middle East. They have served as a highway for invading armies for centuries. And yet, as Isaiah prayerfully ponders all these things, the Holy Spirit opens His eyes. He takes a step back and surveys the ever-shifting political landscape from God’s perspective. He begins to see how God is at work orchestrating the course of human events. Sovereignly directing the rise and fall of empires. Bringing all things together in order to accomplish His divine plan.

Now think about our own context. The rise of social media makes us all “court prophets” of a sort. All of us are given total access (seemingly) to the best laid plans of our political leaders. As we watch certain events unfold, we are confronted with the complex challenges of a globally connected world. If Twitter is to be believed, the world is either coming to an end or its best days are ahead. Depending on one’s political affiliations, we are in for the best of times or the worst of times. Depending on one’s personal convictions and religious/social leanings, our politicians represent the anti-Christ or are being used by God to righteously bring about His will. Would that we would follow Isaiah’s example! Take a step back! Prayerfully ponder what over what we are seeing and ask the Holy Spirit for divine wisdom to interpret the signs. God is at work, friends! He is still on His throne! He is orchestrating the course of human events. He is sovereignly directing the rise and fall of human empires. He is bringing all things together in order to accomplish His divine plan. As Christians we should know better than to place our trust in kings or princes or presidents or prime ministers. We should know better than to place our trust in the uncertainty of a free market economy. We should know better than to believe our nation is somehow exempt from the volatility of human history. We should know better than to place our hopes in the next worldwide summit or peace treaty or trade agreement. Instead, we should place our confidence in God alone. Under God, every challenge becomes an opportunity to grow in faith. Every

crushing disappointment an opportunity to learn more about the sufficiency of grace. Every victory and success an opportunity to praise God and to give thanks.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 21-23, Ephesians 3

October 5, 2021

The Unsearchable Riches of Christ

Readings for today: [Isaiah 21-23](#), [Ephesians 3](#)

One of the most common stumbling blocks to faith is the exclusivity of Christ. Why would God provide only one way to heaven? And why a 1st century Jewish peasant named Jesus? And what happens to all those around the world and throughout history who never get the chance to hear His name? Surely if God desires all to be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth, He would provide as many pathways as possible? All these questions make sense to me. They are questions I've wrestled deeply with myself. But as I dug down, I found myself grappling with an even deeper question. Why would God choose to save us at all? Why would a perfectly holy, righteous, and just God choose to save an imperfect, unholy, and unrighteous people? Why not wipe us out and start the whole project over? This question brought me face to face with the mystery of God's grace. The mystery of God's love. The mystery of Christ which Paul talks about in today's reading out of Ephesians 3.

“This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel...” It's tough to overstate how challenging this idea would be to Jewish believers. For generations they had been taught that the Gentiles were beyond the pale. Beyond salvation. Beyond the reach of God's love. For generations they had been taught that they were God's chosen people. They were God's treasured possession. They, among all the nations of the earth, enjoyed God's favor. They wholeheartedly embraced the exclusive nature of their relationship with God and rejected any idea of the universality of His grace. In fact, this was -at least in part - why their leaders had Jesus crucified. They simply couldn't get their minds and hearts around Jesus eating with sinners. Dining with prostitutes. Hanging out with Samaritans and other Gentiles along the way.

Paul was a product of his culture. In fact, if you know anything about his life, he was the standard-bearer for the exclusivity of the Jewish faith. So zealous was he for the faith of his ancestors, he persecuted the early church. Dragging followers of Christ from their homes. Throwing them in prison. Even rejoicing in their deaths. But then he met the Risen Christ on the road outside of Damascus and everything changed. He came face to face with the unsearchable riches of Christ. He went eyeball to eyeball with the Lord in all His glory. The grace and love of God that surpasses all human wisdom and knowledge and understanding utterly and completely transformed him from the inside out. Listen to how he describes it...

“To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (Ephesians 3:6, 8-10, 15-21)

So back to my original questions. If you were to ask Paul why God only provided one way to heaven, I think he'd give you a strange look. After all, the mystery he was called to preach was that God had provided a way for everyone to get in. Jew and Gentile alike. No one was left out. If you were to ask Paul why God chose to reveal Himself in this way through a 1st century Jewish peasant named Jesus, I think he'd walk you through all the prophecies of the Old Testament so you could see how this was the fulfillment of God's plan from the beginning. If you were to ask Paul what happens to all those throughout the world and throughout history who never get the chance to hear the name of Jesus, I think you'd see his eyes light up and passion fill his voice as he shared with you the urgency of his mission! The mission to proclaim the good news of the gospel! I think he'd go on to tell you it's why he dedicated his life to planting churches all over the known world so that the gospel could go to the ends of the earth. And I think he'd encourage you to trust the goodness of God. Trust that while Christ can use us as His messengers, He's certainly not bound to us. People come to faith all the time through dreams and visions. I've seen it myself.

Most of all, I think Paul would be confused by our line of questioning. He would wonder why we kept focusing on the exclusivity of Christ when the reality is the opposite. Christ represents the universality of God's saving grace. Jew and Gentile. Male and female. Slave and free. Rich and poor. Black and white and brown. Gay, bi, and straight. Republican and Democrat. Progressive and conservative. You name it. In Christ, we see the breadth and length and height and depth of God's love. A love that breaks down every barrier. A love that crosses every boundary. A love that knows no bounds and has no end. When we embrace Christ, we become rooted and grounded in this love ourselves and bearers of this message of good news to the world.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 24-26, Ephesians 4

October 6, 2021
The Honor of God

Readings for today: [Isaiah 24-26](#), [Ephesians 4](#)

As I seek to understand more about the Scriptures, I find myself reading and researching about honor/shame cultures. It helps me not only understand the world of the Bible but also the world of places like Africa where I often minister. Consider this passage I ran across recently in a book titled, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures*, by Jayson Georges. “The world equates humility with shame and pride with honor. But God inverts this social matrix. Pride ultimately produces shame, and humility is the counterintuitive path to genuine honor.” It resonates, does it not? All of us have probably experienced this on a personal level at some point in our lives.

What’s true for us as individuals is also true for our families, communities, tribes, even nations. Think about what we read yesterday about Tyre and Sidon. Two of the great commercial trading centers in the ancient near east. What was their sin? Pride. Tyre saw itself as “the bestower of crowns, whose merchants were princes, whose traders were the honored of the earth...” (Isaiah 23:8) Sidon enjoyed tremendous wealth and privilege. “And on many waters your revenue was the grain of Shihor, the harvest of the Nile; you were the merchant of the nations.”(Isaiah 23:3) In their pursuit of worldly honor and riches and power, they forgot the Lord. They dishonored God. And they paid the price. “Wail, O ships of Tarshish, for Tyre is laid waste, without house or harbor! Be ashamed, O Sidon, for the sea has spoken...” (Isaiah 23:1, 4)

But it’s not just Tyre and Sidon who make this mistake. Isaiah points out that the whole earth has forgotten God. The whole earth pursues wealth and power and honor and glory apart from God. The whole earth seeks to exalt itself rather than humble themselves before their Creator. Therefore, the Lord will bring His righteous judgment. No one shall escape. “Behold, the Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants. And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the creditor, so with the debtor. The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered; for the Lord has spoken this word.” (Isaiah 24:1-3) And why does the Lord speak such a harsh word? Why does the Lord render such a harsh judgment? Because the Lord is jealous for the glory of His Name. He is jealous for His own honor. He will not rest until the whole earth sings His praises. “They lift up their voices, they sing for joy; over the majesty of the Lord they shout from the west. Therefore in the east give glory to the Lord; in the coastlands of the sea, give glory to the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise, of glory to the Righteous One.” (Isaiah 24:14-16)

Human beings were made for one glorious purpose...to bring honor to their Creator. To enjoy God and to worship Him forever. To praise God for all eternity. This is the great work we were designed for. This is the great work we were made for. And it is to our abiding shame that we neglect this great task and forget our God. It is to our great shame that we “exchange the truth of God for a lie and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!” (Romans 1:25) We pursue worldly honor and worldly wealth and worldly power to our own destruction. Because we have turned away from God and gone our own way, He has “given us up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. We become filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. We are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.” (Romans 1:28-31) And God simply will not allow such evil to stand. So He brings judgment. He lays

low the proud. He shames the arrogant. He dishonors the honored among all the earth. “The Lord of hosts has purposed it, to defile the pompous pride of all glory, to dishonor all the honored of the earth.” (Isaiah 23:9)

This is why we must consider carefully the priorities of our lives. Why do we do the things we do? What drives us? What gives us purpose and fulfillment? Are we truly seeking to honor God in all we say and do? Or are we trying to steal a bit of that honor for ourselves? Are we truly seeking to glorify God in our homes, neighborhoods, schools, and places of work? Or these just means we are using to justify our own ends? Prayerfully consider these things, friends! Be honest with yourself! Get real! And then humble yourself before God lest you fall under His judgment.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 27-28, Ephesians 5

October 7, 2021
A New Day

Readings for today: [Isaiah 27-28](#), [Ephesians 5](#)

“In that day...”

The Lord will punish and slay Leviathan

The Lord will plant His vineyard

Israel will blossom and bear fruit

The Lord will gather all His people from where they have been exiled back home to Jerusalem

The Lord will be a crown of glory to His people

The Lord will restore justice to the land

These are just a few of the promises gleaned from the reading today. God acting on behalf of His people. God bringing mercy out of judgment. Peace out of conflict. Honor out of shame. God not passing over the iniquity of His people or allowing sin and shame to pass but instead purifying His people through righteous judgment and holy discipline that He might restore them once again.

The heart of the reading for me today is Isaiah 28:15-18. Here God confronts His people with a powerful Word. “Because you have said, “We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement, when the overwhelming whip passes through it will not come to us, for we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter...” I think about our own culture. The covenant we too have made with death. Abortion on demand. Suicide. Euthanasia. I think about the lies we believe. Our seeming inability to sift through what’s true and false. Our tendency to naively accept whatever fits our ideological worldview rather than pursue honesty and transparency. I grieve our propensity towards violence. School shootings. Racially-motivated hate crimes. Sexual abuse. I grieve our morbid fascination with self-destruction. Legalization of marijuana and other harmful substances. Addiction to opioids and other pain-killers. All in an attempt to numb our pain. I grieve the fact that we continue to seek refuge in the lies we tell ourselves and in the falsehoods we cling to at all costs. If I were not a Christian, I would despair.

But then I read these words, “Therefore thus says the Lord God, “Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: ‘Whoever believes will not be in haste.’ And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plumb line; and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter. Then your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand...” Once again, I am overwhelmed. God does what I cannot do. God does what we cannot do. God does what no government or business or church or non-profit agency - no matter how pure and righteous their motives - can do! He annuls the covenant we made with death! He sets aside our agreement with Sheol! He lays a foundation in Zion. A sure foundation built on tested and precious stone on which we can build our lives! He doesn’t ask us to rescue ourselves. He doesn’t ask us to clean up our act. He doesn’t expect us to find a way out of the mess we’ve made. He simply steps in. He restores justice. He restores

righteousness. He sweeps away all the lies and falsehoods. He destroys death. He robs the grave. And He grants His people new life...abundant life...in Him!

Will we still sin? Yes. Are we still a rebellious people? Absolutely. Will we still run from God? Crawl off the altar? Try to build our lives on shifting sand? All that and more. But thankfully God is patient with us. "Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him." (Isaiah 30:18) And because God is faithful, we can be sure a day is coming when...

We will weep no more

We will see Him face to face

We will know His ways and walk in them

We will tear down every idol in our lives

Our brokenness will be bound and our wounds healed

We will sing a new song in the night

We will keep the holy feast

We will witness the victory of the Lord our God

Friends, that day is coming and is already here! In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ the new day has dawned! God has laid His cornerstone! God has set His foundation in Zion! God has annulled our covenant with death! God has set aside our agreement with the grave! God has given us the victory! All we have to do is trust. Believe. Have faith. Place our lives in His hands. He will never let us down.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 29-30, Ephesians 6

October 8, 2021
Spiritual Battle

Readings for today: [Isaiah 29-30](#), [Ephesians 6](#)

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:10-12)

I am blessed to walk among giants. Men and women who make amazing sacrifices in the face of incredible adversity, persecution, and hardship. I think of a young couple I know who serve the poorest of the poor in the streets of La Paz, Bolivia. Every day they work with a community of people who wear masks to hide the shame of their existence. Their work is costly. It takes a toll. And yet they continue to faithfully serve. I think of a South Korean Pastor I know who risks his life to save North Korean refugees. He is known as the “Asian Schindler” and has been involved in running an Underground Railroad from North Korea through China to Southeast Asia in order to repatriate North Korean refugees into South Korean society. It is a ministry fraught with danger. There is a price on his head in North Korea. He has spent many months in a Chinese prison. Still he continues to faithfully serve. I think of another young man I know who serves in Central Asia. He works in countries where it is illegal to preach Christ. Illegal to share your faith. Illegal even to practice your faith on some level. He has to change his name when he is abroad. He cannot share the name of the country where he works. It’s hard. It’s a struggle. And yet he continues to faithfully serve. I think of a pastor I know who serves a small church nearby. It’s a church that used to be much bigger. The pews and the offering plates were full. But now the sanctuary is mostly empty on Sundays. Each month is a struggle to make ends meet. The community around the church has changed dramatically which only increases the challenge of it all. Still the pastor faithfully serves. Though each of these dear friends serves Christ in radically different contexts, they are all engaged in the same spiritual war. They all recognize we aren’t fighting flesh and blood. Our earthly context doesn’t matter. No, the war we are fighting is ultimately spiritual. Our enemy is greater than any human adversary we may face. And that’s why we need to put on the full armor of God if we are to prevail.

The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was to convince the world he doesn’t exist. You and I live in a culture that largely ignores the spiritual realm. We ignore the spiritual forces of evil arrayed against us in the heavenly places. We pretend these things don’t exist. We arrogantly assume we are beyond such things. We believe such things are for the superstitious. The primitive. The ignorant. But the Bible clearly acknowledges the spiritual realm. The Bible clearly declares that there is a great enemy of our souls and he is actively seeking to rob, kill, and destroy. And we must take him seriously.

Every day is a spiritual battle. From the moment we wake up to the moment we go to bed, we are actively being attacked and influenced by our enemy. He wants to discourage us. He wants to sideline us. He wants to tempt us to compromise our deeply held convictions. More than anything else, he wants us to live selfish lives. Lives wrapped around our own well-being. Lives focused on getting as much as we can for as long as we can to make life as comfortable as possible. Frankly, he wants us to pursue the American Dream rather than God’s dream and when we do, we suffer. The world suffers. And the enemy gains a foothold.

Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Resist the temptation to live for yourself. Resist the temptation to live a life of achievement and accumulation. Resist the temptation to hoard God’s

blessings. Instead, put on the whole armor of God. Resist the devil that he may flee. Engage the battle. Wrestle with the spiritual forces of evil. Don't give in! Don't sell yourself so cheaply! Don't compromise with the enemy! Don't give him an inch in your life! Live for Christ. Dedicate your whole life to Christ. Seek Christ with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. As you do, God will do great things through you for His Kingdom.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 31-33, Philippians 1

October 9, 2021
The Impact of Righteousness

Readings for today: [Isaiah 31-33](#), [Philippians 1](#)

Our world is a mess. On this point just about everyone agrees. Our world is full of pain and suffering. Violence and oppression. Abuse and anger. Hatred and deceit. It's hard to hold onto hope. It's hard to see any way out. It seems like the harder we work, the worse things get. The more we strive, the less we achieve. Every action results in an equal and opposite reaction with diminishing returns. Each generation is convinced they have the answer only to watch their plans turn to dust just like the plans of those who came before them. What's the problem? Why is it so hard to make progress? Why do we find Eden so elusive?

There are many answers out there, of course. Many people out there who claim to know the truth. But humanity has consistently failed to complete this project. Their strength gives out. Their wisdom is not up to the task. No matter how many technological advances we make or how hard we try to socially engineer our environment or how often we attempt to correct Mother Nature; we ultimately fall short. Our best laid plans go to waste. Our condition worsened by unforeseen and unintended consequences. This is as true in the church as it is in the world today. We have all forgotten God.

This is why I loved the words from Isaiah this morning. "The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever." (Isaiah 32:17) Of all the things I strive for in my life, I have to admit righteousness is not always at the top of the list. I strive for success. I strive for significance. I strive for influence. I strive to make a difference in the world. These are not sinful strivings per se but they are not what the Lord has required of me. He wants me to pursue righteousness. He wants my church to pursue righteousness. He wants my community to pursue righteousness. He wants my nation to pursue righteousness. And when we do, He promises us peace. Quietness. The restoration of trust. It's a beautiful vision of God's Kingdom come to earth. And it is a byproduct of seeking Him. "The Lord is exalted, for he dwells on high; he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness, and he will be the stability of your times, abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge; the fear of the Lord is Zion's treasure." (Isaiah 33:5-6) We do not know the pathway to peace. We do not know the road to righteousness. We do not know the way to salvation. We are lost. Blind wanderers in a world that is not our home. Only God can direct us. Only God can set our feet on the narrow way that leads to a life of blessing and honor and shalom. So we must go to Him. We must seek Him. We must pursue God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. And once we find Him - and the great news of the gospel is He delights in being found! - we will find what our hearts so long for. We will find righteousness, justice, stability, peace for these are the gifts that come from being in His presence.

You say, "Okay, preacher. I got it. Seek God with all my heart. But what about my life? What about those I love? What about the world in which I live? Aren't I to seek the good of those around me as well?" Absolutely. "He who is noble plans noble things, and on noble things he stands." (Isaiah 32:8) God has placed a noble heart inside you. As such, you will find yourself longing to make a difference. You will find yourself longing to be part of God's mission. You will find yourself longing to spread the good news of His Kingdom. The call to seek God is not a call to inactivity. It is not a call to complacency. It is not a call to passivity. It is a call to action. Righteous action. The kind of action that can only come as we stay in step with the Holy Spirit and walk with Jesus through all of life. Flip over to our reading from Philippians. Listen to how the Apostle Paul describes it, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain...Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that

whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel..." (Philippians 1:21, 27) Clearly Paul is calling for righteous action. He is calling for those who have been made "noble" through the gospel of Jesus Christ to strive for the faith of the gospel and live in a manner worthy of the gospel so that the world will stand up and take notice.

It's a stirring vision. Can you imagine a world where the church is known for righteousness? A righteousness born not of rules or regulations or winning the culture war but of love and peace and joy and grace? Can you imagine what might happen if the church laid aside her pursuit of political power or social platform? Can you imagine what would happen if the church would lay aside her addiction to personal wealth and cultural privilege? Can you imagine what would happen if the church would engage in a life of humble service, mutual submission, and radical sacrifice for the sake of others? Would it not change things? Thankfully, you can see this happening all over the world today. So many churches in so many places bearing witness to the power of the gospel. And each day presents an opportunity for us to link arms with them as well. Will we make mistakes? Of course. Will we fail and fall? Absolutely. Will we say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing at times? Sure. But thankfully our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. And like the Apostle Paul, I am confident "that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6)

Readings for tomorrow: None

October 11, 2021
The Mind of Christ

Readings for today: [Isaiah 34-37](#), [Phil. 2-3](#)

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...” (Phil. 2:5) Sadly, this is largely missing from the American church today. Could you imagine what would happen if the people of God who profess to believe in the authority of the Word of God simply put these words from Philippians 2 into practice? If we truly did nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit? If we truly counted others more significant than ourselves? If we truly grasped the mind of Christ that is already ours through faith in Jesus?

If we are honest, most of what we do is for selfish purposes. Self-protection. Self-provision. Selfish ambition. We do not believe others are more significant than ourselves because we are swimming in a culture that is addicted to self-promotion. Why is social media so popular? Because we can share our highlight reel with the world. We can be the hero of our own story. We can be center of attention. Why is social media so depressing? Because of the competition it invites as we scroll through our feeds and compare ourselves to our friends. Even those who trade in “authenticity” do so in a curated way. Meaning that even as they share their struggles and frustrations and brokenness, it is done in such a way as to draw attention to themselves.

Paul calls us to a different way. The way of Christ. And this way requires humility. It requires us to check all our selfish desires at the door. The pattern Christ sets for us is very specific and very concrete. Christ did not consider his status as God something to be held onto. Christ willingly relinquished all His divine authority and rights and prerogatives. Christ emptied Himself of His divine glory and power in order to become a human being. There is no greater example of humility than the infinite God of the universe limiting Himself by taking on finite human flesh. And not just any flesh but the flesh of a servant. And there is no greater act of humility than this same God becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. The humiliation of Jesus stands in direct contrast to the prideful self-absorption of our culture. And it is something all who claim to follow Jesus must embrace.

Paul embraced the way of Jesus. This letter comes at the end of Paul’s life. He’s in prison in Rome awaiting his trial and probable execution. As he reflects back on all he has experienced, what is his great desire? Christ. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

“To live is Christ and to die is gain.”

“Whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Christ.”

“I count everything as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.”

“I have no righteousness to call my own but only that which comes through faith in Christ.”

All my strivings cease as I “press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

I want to know nothing else but “Christ and the power of His resurrection.”

Does this mean we should abandon everything and live as hermits in the wilderness? No. Some have actually made this attempt but even there pride found them. Even alone in the wilderness, they could not escape themselves. The only answer is to intentionally and relentlessly set your mind and heart on

Christ. Through daily prayer and meditation on Scripture. Weekly corporate worship with your church family. Active participation in some kind of small group where you can share openly, honestly, and vulnerably and be held accountable for your spiritual growth. Finding a place to serve Christ through the local church. These are the means of grace God uses to shape our hearts and minds over a lifetime.

The mind of Christ is not abstract, friends. It doesn't magically appear. It takes concrete form as we walk in relationship with one another and with God. Humility is something that must be practiced because the inertia of our lives is always towards self. Our hearts are inwardly inclined. We navel gaze as a general rule. Imitating Christ requires us to die to self on a regular basis. Crucify the sinful desires of our flesh. Empty ourselves of all our foolish pride, ambition, and conceit. Only as we believe the Jesus Truth and follow the Jesus Way will we obtain the Jesus Life.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 38-40, Phil. 4

October 12, 2021
Promise-Keeper

Readings for today: [Isaiah 38-40, Phil. 4](#)

I love the promises listed in Philippians 4. “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (4:7) “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (4:13) “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” (4:19) They are some of the most beloved in all of Scripture. People memorize them. Post them in special places all over their homes or workplaces. Some even tattoo them on their bodies. But as we read through the passages assigned for today, it struck me that none of the promises listed in Scripture would be worth anything if God were not truly God. The juxtaposition of Isaiah 40 with its glorious vision of God and the very ordinary, very practical promises listed in Philippians 4 for provision, protection, and peace hit me hard. Too often, I tend to focus on my needs, my wants, my desires and can feel overwhelmed. I focus on the challenges and difficulties of my own life and can feel anxious or afraid. I look at what’s happening in my community, my country, or the world around me and I lose hope of things ever getting better. It’s just too much for me to handle. But then I read a passage like Isaiah 40 and I am reminded of the greatness and glory and majesty and splendor of God. Nothing is beyond Him. Nothing is too hard for Him. Nothing is too big for Him. Nothing overwhelms Him. Yes, I grow faint and get tired. My wisdom and understanding fails. Not so with God! He never wears down and His knowledge is unsearchable! His power immeasurable! His love unconditional! His faithfulness extends to all generations!

Take a moment and re-read the wonderful words from Isaiah and let yourself rest in the glory of your God! “A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? Who has measured the Spirit of the Lord, or what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales; behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust. Lebanon would not suffice for fuel, nor are its beasts enough for a burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness. To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? An idol! A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains. He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot; he seeks out a skillful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move. Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on

high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name; by the greatness of his might and because he is strong in power, not one is missing. Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God”? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:3-5, 9-31)

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 41-42, Colossians 1:1-2:5

October 13, 2021
Serving the Servant

Readings for today: [Isaiah 41-42](#), [Colossians 1:1-2:5](#)

I remember when it hit me. I was driving on the Garden State Parkway from a weekend in Boston where my wife and I celebrated an anniversary. We were relatively poor. Living on public assistance. I was a full-time grad student at Princeton. Kristi was a part-time curriculum coordinator for an afterschool program in a local school district. We had an 18 month old and one on the way. Life was not easy but we loved each other and we were pursuing the dreams God laid on our hearts. Kristi had fallen asleep as we drove. Incubating another human being was taking it's toll on her. ;-) So it was just me, the Lord, and the open road. As I reflected on our life together, the Lord spoke very clearly to me. He said, "I want you to give the rest of your life in service to others, starting with the woman in the seat next to you. Don't worry about your needs. Don't focus on your wants or desires. I will take care of you. I will provide all you need. Your job is to serve just as My Son served." It's been over twenty years since that conversation and I have no regrets. I've tried to embrace that call as best I can and the Lord has blessed my life beyond measure.

When we read a passage like the one from Isaiah 42 this morning, it's tempting to read it as exclusively applying to Jesus. While we rightly see the life of Jesus reflected in this ancient prophecy, it's important to think about how it might apply to our lives as well. After all, are we not called to be servants of the Servant? Are we not called to align our lives with His life? Live our lives in such a way that we reflect His glory? Imagine how different the world would be if Christians would seek to give their lives away in the same way Jesus gave His life away? What would happen if we gave our lives in service to God's justice in the world? What if we pursued humility rather than pride? Meekness rather than strength? Gentleness rather than power? What if we understood the church to be a "covenant for the people" and a "light to the nations?" What if we sacrificed time and talent and treasure to open the eyes of the blind, set free the oppressed, and rehabilitated those in prison? Would we not experience God's glory? After all, He's very clear. He will give His glory to no other. He will not share Himself with those who refuse to walk in His way.

I think the Apostle Paul hits on some of the same notes in his letter to the Colossian church. Listen to how he puts it, "And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light." (Colossians 1:9-12) Filled with the knowledge of God's will. Filled with all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Walking in a manner worthy of the Lord. Bearing fruit in every good work. Increasing in the knowledge of God. Strengthened by His power. Never ceasing to give thanks. It's a beautiful picture of a life lived for the glory of Christ. A life lived in service to Christ. It's a life every Christian should aspire to live.

So where does one begin? What's the first step? I think it begins with what the Lord shared with me as I drove back to our small apartment in Princeton. It begins with a resolution to serve. To give our lives - like Jesus - as a ransom for many. I'm not talking about adding to the saving work Jesus accomplished on the cross. That was a once for all kind of event that will never be repeated. No, what I'm talking about is dying to self each and every day. Picking up our cross. Bearing the sufferings of others. Bearing the injustices of others. Bearing the pain and heartaches of others. Bearing the burdens of others. This is how we fulfill the law of Christ. This is how we manifest the love of Christ. This is how we live a life of service to Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: [Isaiah 43-44](#), [Colossians 2:6-3:17](#)

October 15, 2021
Words Matter

Readings for today: [Isaiah 45-47](#), [Colossians 3:18-4:18](#)

How do you engage the world around you? What words do you use when you speak? When you tweet? When you post on Facebook or Instagram? When you comment? When you send email? How do the people around you experience you? How do they receive you? What would they say about you if asked? Are you known as a kind person? A gentle person? A positive person? If someone were to record you today as you went about your life, what would they discover? What kind of wake do you leave? Do you build others up or tear them down? Are you quick to speak and slow to listen? Do you find yourself getting easily riled up? Going on the attack? Taking things personally and getting defensive? Lashing out in anger and frustration?

When I was growing up, we would tell ourselves this lie - "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Of course this isn't true. Words matter. Words have power. Words can be used to encourage and words can be used to discourage. Words can be used to lift the spirits of those who are down and bring down the spirits of those who are feeling good. The Apostle Paul recognizes the power of words which is why he encourages his Colossian friends with this verse - "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." (Colossians 4:6)

Convicting, isn't it? Especially if you are the kind of person who binges on cable news or scrolls endlessly through your twitter feed. As a pastor, I purposefully try to enter these spaces. I purposefully try to engage in a healthy, positive way on social media. I follow people from all across the political and theological and social spectrum. I try to stay up on the news of the day by browsing several different platforms. I have to tell you it isn't easy. My heart gets beat up along the way. My soul takes a pounding from all the anger and hate and vitriol that is out there, We don't seem to know how to talk to each other anymore. We apply litmus tests to each other based on the company we keep. I think of the blowback television personality Ellen DeGeneres received a few years back after being "caught" watching a football game with former President George W. Bush. People from her own tribe questioned her "liberal credibility" because she ate popcorn at a sporting event next to someone from the other side of the political aisle. I think of the blowback a pastoral colleague received recently for meeting with someone from a different theological tribe than our own. Rumors. Gossip. Innuendo. Christians bearing false witness about this man because he dared to meet with someone outside our stream. It's getting out of hand. And real people are suffering real consequences as a result. Jobs are being lost. Livelihoods destroyed. Businesses are being shut down. All because we can't seem to follow Paul's advice. To speak with grace. To season our words with salt so that we might preserve and add flavor to our conversations. To treat everyone with the dignity and worth they deserve as people made in the image of God.

Why is this so hard for us? I believe it has to do with fear. We fear what we don't understand. We fear those who are different. We fear change and uncertainty and our world is full of that right now. Not only do we find ourselves in the midst of massive cultural upheaval but the pace at which it's happening is scary. One day vaping is considered a safe alternative to cigarettes. The next day we are performing funerals for young people who are dying from it. One day we affirm surgical transitions for young people still struggling through puberty and the next some of those same people are asking for de-transitioning surgeries to return to their biological gender. One day we legalize marijuana and the next we are finding out the negative impacts on the adolescent brain. Our "ready, fire, aim" approach is

not working. Our inability to sit down and reason together is costing us dearly. Our unwillingness to hear the other side or listen to different opinions or consider alternative evidence is harmful and abusive.

So what can we do? Each of us is given a sphere of influence. For some of us it is our home. Our family. Our circle of friends. For others it is the team we lead at work or the business we run. For others it is our congregation. For still others it is the constituency we serve. Whatever authority God has given you, use it to build up. Whatever power God has given you, use it for the good of those around you. Whatever influence God has given you, use it to bless others even if they don't agree or belong to your tribe. Speak words of grace. Words of life. Words of hope into those around you. For this is what God has done for us. Remember, none of us agreed with God. None of us stood on His side. None of us came from His tribe. Still He came to us. Still He laid down His life for us. Still He loved us so much He gave His only Begotten Son. So believe in Him. Speak in His name. Allow His Spirit to sanctify your words today.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 48-49, 1 Thessalonians 1

October 16, 2021
Raising Expectations

Readings for today: [Isaiah 48-49](#), [1 Thessalonians 1](#)

What did you expect when you first came to faith in Jesus Christ? Some expect all their problems to go away. Some expect all their suffering will end. Some have no expectations that anything will change other than their eternal destiny. Some expect to see miracles of healing and provision in their life. Some expect to receive a new circle of friendships. Some expect to live with an intimate sense of God's abiding presence. Others expect the church to become their family. What are your expectations? Have they been met? Have they been fulfilled? If you're like most Christians, I expect you've been disappointed along the way or felt let down at times in your journey of faith.

One of the real problems in the American church is we expect so little. We expect so little from God. We expect God to bless all our plans. We expect God to sprinkle fairy dust on all our problems. We expect God to indulge our sin. We expect God to be "on-call" when we have an emergency. But God is much greater than we can ever imagine. He is far wiser and far more powerful and far more loving that we can possibly fathom. Just think what would happen if God said "yes" to all our prayers? Wouldn't our lives turn into an absolute disaster? Haven't you ever prayed for something only to find out later it wouldn't have been good for you? Thankfully, God is a good Father. He knows what's best for us. We can trust Him.

We expect so little from the church. We expect the church to be a safe place for us but we're unwilling to help make it safe for others. We expect the church to meet our needs but rarely raise a hand to help out. We expect the church to produce programming that makes us or our children feel good but then jump ship the moment another church down provides something more attractive or exciting. We expect the church to be family but we are not willing to make the sacrifices necessary in our own lives to build the deep relationships required. Deep down, we all know what's required. We know becoming a family requires something from each and every member. The church will only be as strong as the shared commitment and sacrifice of the people who call her home.

And that brings me to my last point this morning, we expect so little from ourselves. We do not humble ourselves before God and seek to follow His ways. We do not plant ourselves deep in His Word and in prayer. We do not pursue holiness and righteousness. We do not offer forgiveness and grace nor are we willing to do the hard work of reconciliation with those we've wounded or who've wounded us. Admittedly, these are broad stereotypes. I recognize there are many who do all these things and more but in my twenty plus years of pastoral experience they are more the exception rather than the rule. It is any wonder then that the church in America experiences so little of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit?

Listen to how Paul describes the early believers in Thessaloniki... "For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that God has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia." (1 Thessalonians 1:4-7) The early church held great expectations. They expected God to work miracles on their behalf for His glory and the expansion of His Kingdom on earth. They expected much from each other as they built diverse worshipping communities across racial, cultural, and generational barriers. They expected much from themselves as they pursued lives

of personal holiness before the Lord. And God added to their number daily those being saved. God used them to conquer an empire not through violence or the exercise of political power but through self-sacrificing love. The men and women of the early church laid down their lives for the sake of the gospel. For the sake of their church family. For the sake of one another and their example has inspired millions through the ages to do the same.

What are your expectations as a Christian? What do you expect from yourself? Are you intentionally growing a deep, intimate relationship with Christ? Are you seeking to faithfully walk in His ways? To live a life of holiness and righteousness before Him? What do you expect from your church family? How are you helping to build her up? How are you helping people get connected with each other? How are you plugging in and serving and giving and helping your local church thrive? What do you expect from God? Does He exist to serve you and your needs or do you exist to serve Him and His Kingdom? God has great expectations for His people. He had made us in His image. Redeemed us through the death of His own Son. And He now sends us out into the world to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Readings for tomorrow: None

October 18, 2021

Invitation

Readings for today: [Isaiah 50-55](#), [1 Thessalonians 2](#)

I still remember receiving the invitation to attend Princeton Theological Seminary. I was frankly shocked. After all, I was not an impressive candidate for admission. I had flunked out of college and even though I re-applied and finished my degree, my cumulative GPA was not good at all. I had only been a Christian for a few years so my ability to articulate my faith in the essay section of the application was weak at best. My interview didn't go all that well either as I lacked self-confidence. To this day, I am not sure why Princeton felt led to extend an offer to me to become a student but I will be forever grateful that they did. I loved my time there. I loved the friendships I forged. I loved the atmosphere of academic freedom and learning from some of the most brilliant minds in the world.

One of the greatest blessings for me personally was getting to know Dr. Tom Gillespie. Dr. Gillespie served both as President of the seminary and a New Testament professor. I took two classes from him and got to know him pretty well. He and I would walk to and from class in the basement of Miller Chapel or Stuart Hall and talk about life and ministry. He was a wise mentor who pastored me well. One of my favorite memories of him was when he would lead communion during chapel each week. He always gave the invitation to the Lord's Table from Isaiah 55:1-3.

“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant...”

As amazing as the invitation to attend Princeton was for me, it pales in comparison to the invitation the Lord gives us to feast at His Table. At the Table of the Lord, God provides the richest of fare. His own body and blood, freely given to all who would seek Him. The food He provides sustains us through the challenges of this life. The drink He provides quenches every possible thirst. The bread and the cup are signs and symbols of the eternal covenant God has secured for us by offering up His very life. And every time we share in this meal, we remember and proclaim the Lord's saving death until He comes again.

Every time I read this passage, I am brought to my knees. The words of an old hymn immediately come to mind, “Amazing love! How can it be that Thou, my God, wouldst die for me?” I am not worthy. There was nothing commendable about my life that would attract God's attention. Nothing admirable about the way I was living that would draw God's gaze. Nothing holy about my life that would earn God's favor or demand His respect. I was lost. I was lonely. I was headed for a life of addiction. A life of pain and suffering. A life of disappointment and defeat. Then I met God. And He invited me in to dine with Him and His family. He set me a place at His Table. He quenched my soul's thirst and satisfied my soul's hunger and I have never been the same. Friends, His invitation is open to all who would seek Him. His grace is free to all who would believe in Him. Listen diligently to His voice! Incline your ear and come to Him! Hear and believe that your soul may live!

Readings for tomorrow: [Isaiah 56-58](#), [1 Thessalonians 3](#)

October 19, 2021
A House of Prayer for All People

Readings for today: [Isaiah 56-58](#), [1 Thessalonians 3](#)

One of my favorite worship experiences took place in South Chicago when I was in college. We were in La Villita or “Little Village” which is a predominantly Mexican-American enclave, working at a church there. We painted and helped restore the old building they were meeting in. We led youth group for the teenagers and afterschool programs for the younger kids. We built relationships with former gang members from the Latin Kings and Two Sixes. It was an eye-opening experience for a group of relatively wealthy white college students from Boulder, CO. The week kicked off with a worship service and it just so happened that on the particular week we had arrived, the pastor had arranged to do a pulpit swap with a black church in North Lawndale which is a predominantly African-American community a few blocks north of La Villita. The service started with the black choir processing in singing and dancing. Once they got to the front, the Latino worship band began playing praise songs in Spanish. The praise leader then offered a bi-lingual prayer on behalf of the entire community and introduced the preacher. He preached in true African-American style. “Start low. Go slow. Rise higher. Strike fire. Sit down in a storm!” Brilliant in oration. Passionate in delivery. Deep in biblical/theological reflection. It was awesome. So awesome, in fact, that about midway through his sermon, the interpreter sat down. He was no longer needed. It was clear to him and to everyone else in the room that even though the preacher was speaking English, everyone was hearing him in their own heart language. It was like Pentecost. The Holy Spirit became the interpreter. My mouth was hanging wide open. It was a taste of heaven.

I thought back to that experience when I read these words from Isaiah today, “And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, “I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.” (Isaiah 56:6-8) I am so thankful for these words because I am - by the Bible’s definition - a foreigner. A Gentile. Someone not chosen. I was born apart from God. I am not of the biological lineage of Abraham. I am not a child of the covenant. I know nothing of the significance of circumcision or the Passover or the Promised Land. The Exodus story is not my story. The Old Testament doesn’t represent my history. And yet, God has adopted me as His own child. God has grafted me into His covenant. God has made His story my story and for that I am forever grateful.

Do you ever wonder what heaven will look and feel like? What languages we’ll speak? What the worship experience will be like? Do you ever wonder about the people who will be there gathered with you around God’s throne? Isaiah gives us the answer. “God’s house will be a prayer for all peoples.” It will include Jews and Gentiles. It will include those of African, Asian, Latino, European, and Indigenous descent. Every family. Every tribe. Every clan. Every nation will be represented around God’s throne. They will speak a multitude of languages. They will come from a myriad of cultural backgrounds. They will have had a variety of life experiences. This has been God’s plan from the beginning. To gather that which has been scattered. To restore that which has been lost. To tear down every dividing wall of hostility that sets us apart.

Readings for tomorrow: [Isaiah 59-61](#), [1 Thessalonians 4](#)

October 20, 2021
Christian Hope

Readings for today: [Isaiah 59-61](#), [1 Thessalonians 4](#)

Hope seems so elusive these days. The world is groaning. Our nation is struggling. Our communities are hurting. Our churches are dying. People we know and love are suffering. I think of the families of those who have lost loved ones over the past 18 months to COVID. I've spent time with many of them. Listening to them share their grief. I think of the families of those who have lost loved ones to suicide recently. I've spent time with many of them as well. Listening to them share their pain. I think of the people I know who've had to shut down their businesses due to the lockdowns or supply chain issues or lack of a steady workforce. I've listened to them share their frustrations. I think of the people I know who can't find work in their field anymore because of all the changes that have taken place. I've listened to them share their fears. I think of the pastors I know who've watched their churches be torn apart through divisions over masks, vaccines, politics, social/cultural issues, etc. Stunned by the lack of grace among the people of God, they feel paralyzed and isolated and question their call. It's heartbreaking and soul-crushing and if we aren't careful, we will fall into despair.

We are not the first to face such things. We are not the only ones weighed down by such burdens. The early church suffered greatly as well. They too knew hardship and pain. They were intimately acquainted with death and disease. They understood what happened when economies crashed and nations failed and divisions threatened to tear them apart at the seams. Most of Paul's letters are written to churches who were struggling with all these things and more. They too found themselves on the brink of despair. That's why I find his words so comforting this morning...

“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

We do not grieve as those who do not have hope. We do not suffer as those who have no salvation. We believe Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again. We are not fighting a losing battle. We are not engaged in a war that will never end. We are not doomed to wander in the ruins of this world with no escape. There will come a day when the Lord Himself will descend from heaven. He will sound the trumpet of God. With the voice of an archangel, He will issue His glorious command. The dead in Christ will rise. Those who are alive will join them. Together they will ascend to meet the Lord to celebrate His return just as the Roman citizens used to rush out of the city of Rome to meet their victorious generals as they returned from conquest. As Christians, we are to keep our eyes fixed on the horizon. We are to pray continuously for the Lord's return. We place our ultimate hope in Jesus not technological advance or scientific research or political compromise or social policy or homogenous community or military might or cultural hegemony. He alone will set all things right. He alone will make all things new. He alone will wipe every tear from our eye and put an end to all evil and sin and suffering and pain. Fix your eyes on Jesus, friends, and encourage your brothers and sisters in Christ to do the same.

Readings for tomorrow: [Isaiah 62-64](#), [1 Thessalonians 5](#)

October 21, 2021
Potter's Hand

Readings for today: [Isaiah 62-64](#), [1 Thessalonians 5](#)

A few years back, I had the privilege of visiting one of our mission partners outside of Kigali, Rwanda. Hope Haven is doing amazing work bringing hope and opportunity through education to some of the poorest of the poor in that part of the world. On our last night in town, we had dinner at a rooftop restaurant overlooking all of Kigali. It was a beautiful evening spent eating great food and sharing with new friends. Jason and Kimberly Peters were our hosts for the week and they were amazing. Jason serves as the CEO of Hope Haven and often spends his summers in Rwanda with his wife and family. We became very fast friends. Pastor Jimmy and his wife Sharol lead Potter's Hand Church in Kigali and Pastor Jimmy was instrumental in helping build Hope Haven due to his civil engineering background and experience in construction.

During the course of the meal, Pastor Jimmy shared his story with us. He is a trained civil engineer who has worked all over Rwanda. He has advanced degrees from more than one university. He has not only led many projects but consulted on many more and is very well-respected. In fact, prior to getting involved in ministry, he had an opportunity to go to work for some large construction firms overseeing some of the key infrastructure work in his country. However, God had a different plan for Jimmy's life. At the same time his professional career was taking off, he was serving part-time as an assistant pastor in his church. They had a crisis of leadership. It was extremely painful and resulted in many people leaving, including several of their key leaders. Jimmy was asked to fill the gap. He had a decision to make. Should he take the exciting, lucrative job offer from the government or take the difficult, low-paying job of helping his church recover? As he prayed, God led him to verses like this one from Isaiah 64:8, "But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand."

Jimmy knew the call had come. He was to serve the church. He gave up his position and power and wealth and political influence to serve a church broken by conflict. A church struggling to make ends meet. A church that was coming apart at the seams. He gathered the elders and leaders together and shared the verse God had given him. They renamed the church "Potter's Hand." I wish I could tell you some great story of success. Some great story about how God has honored Pastor Jimmy's choice by bringing prosperity and rapid growth to the congregation. What I can tell you is the story Jimmy shared with me. The story of God's abiding faithfulness to a small group of people hungry for the gospel with a passion to serve God's Kingdom. Pastor Jimmy has led his congregation well. Much healing has taken place. The church is growing. God is moving. But it is long, hard work. There are leadership challenges. Financial challenges. Ministry challenges. And yet, the verse God gave Pastor Jimmy before he stepped into this ministry continues to guide them. He is the Potter. We are the clay. The clay doesn't ask the Potter, "Why have you made me like this?" The clay doesn't question the Potter's plans for it's life. The clay doesn't worry because the Potter knows what He's doing. He is shaping us for His own glory.

It's an ancient insight that still holds true today. What was true for the prophet Isaiah has held true for Pastor Jimmy. CEO Jason. Pastor Doug. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord. God is the master potter. We are his clay. He has us right where He wants us...on His wheel...and He is shaping us to serve His purposes in this world. We have no need to ask Him, "Why?" No need to question His plans. We simply are called to trust and obey. To let the Potter do what the Potter does best. What is the

Potter doing in your life today? How is He shaping you? How is He forming you? Where is He at work in you? Give Him thanks no matter what season you find yourself in.

If you want to find out more about Hope Haven or Potter's Hand Ministries, here are the links...

<https://www.facebook.com/ThePottersHandMinistries/>

<https://hopehavenrwanda.org/>

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 65-66, 2 Thessalonians 1

October 22, 2021
With God's Help

Readings for today: [Isaiah 65-66](#), [2 Thessalonians 1](#)

“To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power...” (2 Thessalonians 1:11)

A common misconception in the Christian life is that while God performs the act of salvation, the rest of life is up to us. We raise our hands and come forward as a response to the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration in our hearts but then leave the sanctuary with this inner resolve to live by our own will-power. How many sermons have we heard over the years that could double as motivational TED talks? How many Bible studies turn into self-help sessions with a little Jesus thrown in? How many conferences and retreats have we attended where the main message was simply work harder? Do more? Be better for Jesus? I cannot tell you how many times I have picked up a book, downloaded a podcast, or attended a conference hoping to hear the gospel only to be told overtly or covertly that the quality of my life really depends on me. My self-discipline. My ability to resist temptation. The intentional way I live my life.

The Bible is clear. We simply do not have the power to live the Christian life. We do not have the will or the discipline to make it happen. Left to our own devices, we will struggle. Left to our own resources, we will fall. Trusting in our own strength, we will fail. Living the Christian life is not a matter of learning some new techniques. It's not a matter of turning over a new leaf. It is about transformation. Total-life transformation from the inside out and it is the work of God.

In the verse above, Paul prays for three things for his Thessalonian friends. All of them come from God. Not a single one is rooted in the human heart. He prays God will make them worthy of His calling. Essentially, he is praying for God's Spirit to so root and ground them in the righteousness of Christ that every facet of their lives - home, community, work, school, etc. - would reflect His glory. He prays their lives might become a living reflection of the reality God has already brought about through their salvation in Jesus Christ. In Christ, we are the very righteousness of God. Those called by Christ are constantly being formed and re-formed into His image, thereby being made worthy of the initial call God placed on their lives when He first saved them. This involves human activity of course. A change in human behavior. But even that is not accomplished through our own willpower alone.

The second thing Paul prays for is for God to fulfill their every resolve for good. Each and every day, we are faced with a fundamental choice. Will I live for God or will I live for me? Will I live selflessly or selfishly? Will I seek to honor God or will I gratify the desires of the sinful nature? This fundamental choice works itself out in lots of different situations in every facet of our lives. It pops up in every conversation. Every task assigned to us. Every chore we perform. Every interaction we have with another divine image-bearer who crosses our path. However it manifests itself, the fundamental choice is always the same. Will we do good or evil? And because we are predisposed through our sinful nature to do evil, we need God's help to do good.

The final thing Paul prays for is the power to perform every work of faith. Once God has called us and set us apart for Himself. Once He has reoriented our desires away from evil and towards the good. The final piece we need is the power to actually perform the action. We need the power to actually take the next step. To confirm our calling by acting on our resolve to walk by faith and not by sight. Only by tapping the limitless power of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit will we ever find the strength

to live for Christ. And this is why we must spend so much time with Him. Learning to hear His voice. Seek His wisdom. Surrender to His strength. This is why prayer and meditation on Scripture is absolutely vital to the Christian life. It's why weekly worship with a local body of believers is essential for every single Christian. It is through these ordinary "means of grace" that God makes us worthy of His calling. Fulfills our every resolve for good. And gives us the strength to perform every work of faith.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 1-2, 2 Thessalonians 2

October 23, 2021
Broken Wells

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 1-2, 2 Thessalonians 2](#)

For generations, my family owned land in western Nebraska. Farmers. Ranchers. Feedlot owners. We managed a fairly significant operation. Over time, the land has been broken up and parceled out. Each generation taking a piece. Children and grandchildren left home and didn't return. The line of farmers has now died out though we still rent back what we do own to others who work the land in our place. A few years ago, I took my children back to see the land. Back to see the home where their grandparents and great-grandparents grew up. Back to see the cemetery where so much of their family is buried. It was a great trip. Filled with lots of stories. Lots of laughter. A reunion with cousins. A renewed sense of connection to a "place."

One of the big things I talked to my children about was the availability of water. Access to water is everything in this part of the country. If you don't have access, you are locked into a crop like dry-land wheat. The yield is poor. The value of the land plummets. It's incredibly hard to make a living. If you do have access, you can grow crops like corn. The yield is high. The value of the land skyrockets. Making a good living becomes far more feasible. The same is true for the pasture. We have a well system that benefits the herds of cattle that graze there all summer long. Ease of access to water makes for a better beef product in the long-run. Thankfully, our wells go all the way down into the Ogallala Aquifer which is one of the largest in the world. It means we'll have access to life-giving water decades to come.

One of the striking images from our reading today comes from Jeremiah 2:13, "For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water." Cisterns in the ancient world were holding tanks built at ground level or just below it to capture rain water. While important, they were highly dependent on consistent weather patterns. During seasons of drought, these cisterns ran dry. If they developed a leak, they became useless. In short, they were a poor substitute for a fountain or a natural spring. Human survival depends on having a reliable source for freshwater. Without this supply, humanity suffers and dies. Their crops wither and die. Their herds grow famished and die. I've seen the effects firsthand in southern Ethiopia where they have to depend on the annual rains for their water supply. I've also seen it firsthand on our own land when wells run dry or break down and water no longer is easily available.

God essentially tells Jeremiah that the same truth holds for the spiritual life. God is like the Ogallala Aquifer. He is a never-ending source of abundant, life-giving water that flows like a spring or fountain. He is more than enough to quench any thirst. More than enough to bring life to an otherwise arid land. More than enough to supply all their needs. Why then do God's people feel the need to make their own cisterns? Why do they feel the need to provide for their own water supply? Why do they turn to other gods who cannot supply what they need? Cannot bring life to their land? Cannot quench their spiritual thirst?

We face those same questions today. What cisterns are we building as we seek to provide for ourselves? Is it our 401k? Our rainy day fund? Our operational reserve? What happens when our cistern springs a leak? The market crashes. A pandemic strikes. A lockdown ensues. What then? What other gods are we turning to? What priorities are we placing before our Lord and Savior? Is it youth sports? Business? Leisure activity? Sleeping in? When we feel depressed or anxious, what drug do we use to find peace?

Is it alcohol? Marijuana? Opioids? When we feel isolated or lonely, to whom do we turn? Pornography? A casual hookup? Friends, we are as guilty as the people of Israel. We have placed our trust in our own strength, our own wisdom, our own power to get us out of the mess we find ourselves in. We place our trust in leaders who are unfaithful. We place our trust in markets that are unstable. We place our trust in a future that is uncertain. When will we learn? The only hope we have is that we belong - body and soul - to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ! He is the only Source of Living Water that will quench our soul's thirst.

Readings for tomorrow: None

October 25, 2021
The Pain of God

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 3-7](#), [2 Thessalonians 3](#), [1 Timothy 1](#)

Jeremiah is a hard book to read. Especially if one gets in touch with the pain present throughout. Not only Jeremiah's pain as he watches his people and his nation struggle and suffer and eventually be destroyed. But God's pain as well as His people betray Him by chasing after other gods. So intertwined is the pain of God with His prophet that it is often hard to know who's speaking. For example, Jeremiah 4:19 says, "My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent, for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war." (Jeremiah 4:19) Traditionally, these words have been ascribed to Jeremiah himself because we simply cannot fathom God saying such things. However, when one looks closely at the text, it is clear God is speaking in verse 18 ("Your ways and your deeds have brought this upon you. This is your doom, and it is bitter; it has reached your very heart.") and in verse 22 ("For my people are foolish; they know me not; they are stupid children; they have no understanding. They are 'wise'—in doing evil! But how to do good they know not.") Is it possible that we are so uncomfortable with the idea that God might feel pain that we automatically bracket this reading out of the text?

We're going to see this dynamic pop up over and over again throughout this book and it forces us to come to grips with how we see and understand God. Classically, the question goes to the "impassibility" of God. The idea that God doesn't have "passions" or "pathos" which has to do with suffering. Some have interpreted this to mean God doesn't have emotions but that's clearly not true. God expresses a whole range of emotions throughout the Scriptures. More specifically this idea has to do with the suffering of God. Can God suffer? Does such suffering suggest a change in God? Does it threaten the immutability of His nature and character? Historically, the answer has been "yes" which then forces us to find other explanations for what we read in texts like the one before us today. But what if God suffers? What if God chooses - in His freedom - to be the kind of God who moves towards suffering? Who embraces suffering? Who welcomes suffering without it changing who He is? Is this not the heart of the gospel? Is this not part of the mystery of the Incarnation? Eternal God choosing to take on human flesh? With all its weaknesses and struggles and hardships? Is this not the heart of the passion of our Christ? God suffering with us and for us even to the point of death?

It seems to me that we lose nothing by embracing the pathos of God if we understand God has freely embraced such pathos according to His own will. Certainly, such suffering is not forced on God. It doesn't take God by surprise. It doesn't enact a change on God's experience. God is beyond all these things. He truly is immutable or unchanging. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. There is no shadow or turning in Him. But at the same time, God has revealed Himself in a particular, one might even argue, peculiar kind of way. He is a God who embraces a broken creation. A God who covenants with a broken people. A God who is steadfast and faithful and loyal and true even in the face of evil. He is a God who likens His relationship with His people to a marriage and the faithlessness of His people to adultery. He frequently uses the language of betrayal and heartache and pain to express His dismay over the sinful choices His people make. No one forces God to remain faithful. No one makes God forgive. No outside force can drive God to do anything He Himself has not already chosen to do in complete freedom. Which makes passages like the one we read today and others like it throughout the book of Jeremiah so intriguing.

What if God is in anguish over us? What if being in relationship with us breaks God's heart? What if God's choice to love us from before the foundations of the earth involved Him choosing unimaginable

suffering? Would this change how you relate to Him? Change how you see Him? Change how you experience Him? Change how you love Him?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 8-9, 1 Timothy 2

October 26, 2021

Truth

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 8-9, 1 Timothy 2](#)

Truth is a rare commodity in our day and age. Fake news. Outright lies. Conspiracy theories. Ideologically-driven news cycles. It's hard to discern what is true and what is false in our world. Add to that the commercially driven lies our culture sells about beauty, identity, happiness, fulfillment, etc. and we find ourselves swimming in a cesspool of deceit. Social media has only thrown gas on this fire. Exacerbating a phenomena that threatens the very fabric of our society. Sadly, the church has fallen prey to these same forces. Trading in the truth of the gospel for a more palatable, therapeutic gospel that fills the seats, sells books, and makes rockstars out of megapastors. But it's not just the megachurches who fallen for these lies. I cannot tell you the number of small churches I know who've allowed themselves to be defined more by the culture wars raging around us than the truth of the gospel. I cannot tell you the number of churches I know who care more about one's political affiliation, one's musical preference, one's theological camp, or one's denominational label than the truth God lays out for us in Scripture. I cannot tell you the number of individuals I meet who claim to be Christian but whose lives exhibit little, if any, evidence of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Left without a champion, truth is lost and our world descends into chaos.

Jeremiah faced a similar situation, living as he did in the final days of the kingdom of Israel. "Let everyone beware of his neighbor, and put no trust in any brother, for every brother is a deceiver, and every neighbor goes about as a slanderer. Everyone deceives his neighbor, and no one speaks the truth; they have taught their tongue to speak lies; they weary themselves committing iniquity...Their tongue is a deadly arrow; it speaks deceitfully; with his mouth each speaks peace to his neighbor, but in his heart he plans an ambush for him." (Jeremiah 9:4-5, 8) It sounds strikingly familiar, does it not? Those with whom we disagree are not just wrong, they are evil. Those who are different are corrupt. Those who will not toe the line when it comes to ideological purity cannot be trusted. Their motives are suspect. They must have a hidden agenda. Surely there is a conspiracy afoot!

"Again the Lord said to me, "A conspiracy exists among the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem..." (Jeremiah 11:9) AHA! There it is! Confirmation of the deep state! Confirmation that those who don't agree with us are plotting to take over! Confirmation of the most nefarious intentions of our enemies! SEE! It's all right there in the Bible! But then Jeremiah confronts us with the hard truth. The "conspiracy", as it were, exists not "out there" but "in here." Inside every human heart. Deceit. Fake news. Blatant falsehoods. Hidden agendas. Guess what? They're all right here. In my heart. I fight them every single day. My entire life is a battle against such evil. So is yours if you're honest. Listen to Jeremiah's own words, "For they are all adulterers, a company of treacherous men. They bend their tongue like a bow; falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 9:2-3) He's describing us. He's describing humanity. The pagans and the people of God.

The truth, friends, is much more complex than we want to acknowledge. We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. There is none who is righteous. Not a single one. All of us are like sheep who have gone astray and it is only the love of the Good Shepherd that keeps us from destroying ourselves. Left to our own wisdom, we will become confused. Left to our own strength, we will fail. Left to our own riches and resources, we will eventually go broke. And this is why God says to Jeremiah, "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord

who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord."(Jeremiah 9:23-24)

Truth can only be found in God. The only way to discover truth is through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Only after our dead hearts have been revived by the Holy Spirit can we discern what is true and false about our world and about ourselves. Only as we continue to surrender our own agendas, our own ideas, our own thoughts, our own opinions, our own truth to our Lord will we come to see His Truth for what it is and rejoice. Only as we fix our eyes on Jesus will we be able to see through all the lies and deceit this world has to offer.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 10-11, 1 Timothy 3

October 27, 2021

Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 10-11, 1 Timothy 3](#)

Imagine you're Timothy. A young man (perhaps in his late twenties or early thirties) who's been entrusted by Paul with the church in Ephesus. Ephesus is at the zenith of its power and influence. Made capital of the region by Caesar Augustus, it is a center for learning and commerce. It is home to one of the seven ancient wonders of the world. The Temple of Artemis draws thousands of pilgrims from all over the region. They came to worship. They came to trade. They came to make deposits at the Temple which served as the largest bank in the area as well. The cult of Artemis created great wealth. An entire economy had grown up around the worship of their deity. The priestesses exercised great political and social influence. Your mentor Paul started a riot here when he preached the gospel and the church he left behind was facing some significant challenges.

Whenever the gospel penetrates a new region, one of the real dangers that pops up almost immediately is syncretism. The merging of older, pagan religious beliefs with the truth of the Christian faith. Some of it is brought on by the missionaries themselves as they try to translate the gospel into the local language and culture. Some of it is brought by the new believers as they struggle to leave the old ways behind. What often ends up emerging is a faith that is sub-Christian or pseudo-Christian and this is exactly what Paul warns Timothy about in the beginning of this letter. "As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith...Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions." (1 Timothy 1:3-4, 6-7) Of course, the same challenge holds true in areas that are gospel-saturated. Consider the challenges of the post-Christian west. The rapid decline of Christianity in Europe and the United States. The fracturing of the church. The emphasis on non-essential doctrines. The utter lack of grace and charity for fellow believers. It's just so hard to keep the main thing the main thing.

So what is the "main thing" you might ask? Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 3:16, "Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory." Put another way, Christ was born. Christ died. Christ was raised. Christ's resurrection was witnessed by angels. Christ has been proclaimed among all the nations. Christ has been believed by all kinds of people. Christ ascended into heaven. This is the great mystery of our faith. This is the beating heart of the gospel. It has nothing to do with us and everything to do with what God has done for us. Sure, we can parse out the finer points of our theology. We can engage in all kinds of metaphysical speculation on how Christ's two natures co-existed. We can wax philosophical about the eternal mysteries of the Godhead. We can debate the ethical implications of the Kingdom. We can argue over the specifics of eschatology. But all of it is meaningless - vanity of vanities according to Solomon - in comparison to what God has revealed in Jesus Christ.

These words are as much for us as they are for Timothy. The challenge is just as real for the church today as it was for the church in Ephesus. Unity in the essentials. Liberty in the non-essentials. Charity for all. The reality is it is so easy for us to get bogged down. Even as we read this letter, we find ourselves tempted to focus on non-essential questions like who gets to serve and in what role or what people should wear to worship or the patriarchal/misogynistic nature of 1st century culture. Friends, put

aside the petty squabbles. Let go of any personal preferences. Relinquish your grip on theological certainty and instead embrace the great mystery of our faith - Christ was born, Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ ascended, and Christ will come again. Focusing on Jesus is how we keep the main thing the main thing for He Himself is the main thing! Amen?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 12-13, 1 Timothy 4

October 28, 2021
COVID Fatigue

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 12-13, 1 Timothy 4](#)

For months I've been praying for dear friends in ministry across the country. I've had countless conversations with pastors and ministry leaders from all walks of life. All kinds of churches. Across all sorts of denominations. For years they've served their congregations faithfully. They've wept with those who weep. They've laughed with those who laugh. They've mourned with those who mourn. They've rejoiced with those who rejoice. They've baptized, married, counseled, and buried countless people. They've been invited into some of the most sacred and tender spaces in people's lives. They've been trusted with secrets. They've borne incredible burdens. They've done all they can to model Jesus to those they love and serve. But the last 18 months has taken a toll. They're burned out from the stress. Broken by the pressure. Beaten down by the constant conflict. They feel betrayed by the very people to whom they've dedicated their lives. According to most estimates, 30% of them are now considering leaving the ministry. Almost 70% report feeling overwhelmed on a regular basis. 40% struggle with anxiety. Another 40% feel exhausted most of the time. It's heartbreaking.

I certainly am not immune to these pressures. However, I also recognize I've benefited from certain built-in advantages. I live in an affluent, extremely healthy community that has weathered the COVID storm relatively well. I've served my church for almost twelve years and can draw on a deep well of trust. I've got an unbelievable leadership team of elders and staff who have shared the load. My marriage is strong as are my relationships with my teenage and adult children. Perhaps most of all, the years I've spent working with pastors in the developing world has helped me maintain perspective in the midst of everything. My brothers and sisters who serve in places like Ethiopia and Uganda and South Sudan have faced, are facing, and will face far more significant challenges that I ever will in my own ministry.

Perhaps that's why these words from Jeremiah hit so close to home this morning, "If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses? And if in a safe land you are so trusting, what will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?" (Jeremiah 12:5) Here God is answering Jeremiah's complaint. He is tired. He is weary. He has been ignored, dismissed, and betrayed by the very people he feels called to serve. He serves at a difficult time in Israel's history. The kingdom is about to fall. The line of kings has failed. Injustice, oppression, tyranny, and corruption have brought the nation to her knees. People are suffering terribly. Those he loves are dying all around him. And though he has a Word from the Lord, no one listens. In the midst of his own heartache, Jeremiah cries out to God. How long, O Lord? Why God are you allowing these things to happen? Where are you in the midst of our pain?

God's answer is direct. If Jeremiah is already tired from racing with men on foot, what's going to happen when God calls him to even greater sacrifice in the days ahead? If Jeremiah is losing heart while he dwells in relative safety and security, what's going to happen when God brings destruction on Jerusalem and drives him into the wilderness? Is God being unkind? Does God lack compassion? Is God being mean? Not at all. He is preparing Jeremiah for the journey ahead. Things are only going to get harder. The suffering of God's people is only going to increase. Pagan nations will invade and burn Jerusalem to the ground. The Temple will be destroyed. The remnant who are left will be dragged into exile. Those who remain will barely survive. And still God's call remains. Jeremiah is to remain faithful. He is to stand at his post. He is to preach God's Word. He is to proclaim God's judgment. He is

to minister to those who fight him and attack him and abuse him and oppress him and say all manner of evil about him.

Does any of that sound familiar? You see, I don't think it's just pastors and priests who are struggling these days. I can't tell you the number of first responders I've talked to who feel exhausted as well. I can't tell you the number of doctors and nurses I know who are on the verge of quitting. I can't tell you the number of teachers and administrators who feel like they are caught in the crosshairs of all that's going on in our culture today. It's heartbreaking. And yet God's call remains for us as well. If we are weary from racing with men on foot, what will happen when the pace picks up and the pressure increases in the days ahead? If we who dwell in relative ease and safety and abundance can't seem to find any peace, what will happen if supply lines truly crash and the economy fails and our political system implodes and our lives get upended permanently? What will we do then?

God calls His people to be salt and light in the world. He never promised it would be easy. He never promised we'd be understood. He never promised we'd be liked or appreciated. In fact, being salty in a world that's lost its flavor can feel very lonely. Being light in a world that grows ever darker can make us feel very alone. That's how Jeremiah felt. That's how many of my friends and colleagues feel. Perhaps that's how you feel today as well. Take heart! Keep the faith! Lift your eyes above the hills, above the circumstances of this world, and look to God! He is with you. He will never leave you or forsake you. He will give you all the strength and wisdom you need to persevere to the end.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 14-16, 1 Timothy 5, 6:2

October 29, 2021
Discouragement

Readings for today: Jeremiah 14-16, 1 Timothy 5, 6:2

There is a myth many Christians believe. If we are walking faithfully with the Lord. If we are obeying His commands and living according to His Word. If we are praying and worshipping and serving Him then we will not face hardship. We will not struggle or suffer or endure any pain. Life will be good and blessed and we will be happy. Fundamentally, we believe if we do our part, God is bound to do His and our lives should reflect His favor.

But then we read a passage like this one from Jeremiah today... “Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me...Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts. I did not sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?” (Jeremiah 15:10, 16-18) Jeremiah is angry with God. He’s bitter and frustrated. He’s fulfilled the call of God. He’s been faithful. He took God’s Word and proclaimed it to the people at great personal cost. They beat and persecute him. They spit on him and mock him. He has no friends. No family. He sits alone. Who knows how long he has suffered? We only know he’s finally reached a breaking point. He is in anguish. He is in pain. He is depressed. He is discouraged. He accuses of God of being deceitful. Lying to him. Pulling a bait and switch.

It’s real. It’s raw. It’s honest. It’s not uncommon. I’ve been there myself. I remember well the 19 months we spent in Wisconsin. We were fully convinced God called us to go there to plant a church. We were excited. We were passionate. We couldn’t wait to get started. God had given us a vision. He had given us plenty of resources. We were confident we would do great things for Jesus. Within a few months, our dream became a nightmare. For the first time in my life, I became a man of “strife and contention” to those I worked for. I felt cursed. Afflicted. Unjustly accused. I didn’t handle it well. I complained. I grew frustrated. I got angry with God. I felt like He had let me down. I felt like He had broken faith with me. After all, I had given up a thriving ministry and uprooted my family and poured my heart and soul into this new work. All to no avail. I ended up broken. Battered. Bruised. I contemplated throwing in the towel on ministry altogether. My wife was in an even darker place. It was the most painful time of our lives.

In the midst of our heartache, I cried out to God and this is what He said. In essence, “Should you accept good from me and not hardship? Did you think this life I called you to was only going to be up and to the right? One success after another? What if it is my will to crush you? To break your pride? To make you suffer so you learn to depend on Me? Am I not enough for you?” It was sobering and convicting and strangely...comforting. Even in our darkest moments, God was there. Though His presence was a refiner’s fire, it felt good. The kind of good one feels after a hard workout or when one has overcome something incredibly difficult. You may still bear the scars but they become badges of honor along the way.

Such was true for Jeremiah as well. Listen to the Lord’s response to him in the midst of his pain. “If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not

prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the Lord. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless." (Jeremiah 15:19-21) The call on Jeremiah's life will be a hard one. God is relentless. He will use Jeremiah as a hammer to break the nation's pride. He will be ostracized. Isolated. Hated. Persecuted. He will suffer and struggle and endure tremendous pain. But through it all, God will be with him. God will give him the strength he needs to bear up under the burden.

Only you know the burdens you carry in life. Only you know the source of those burdens. Sometime we suffer because of our sin. The choices we make lead us down dark paths. We have to own those choices. Take responsibility. Repent and turn back to the Lord. Sometimes the Lord leads us into suffering. To refine us. Test us. Break sinful patterns of pride and self-sufficiency in our lives. In those times, we must submit. Accept. Surrender to His sovereign will and trust even the hard times serve His purposes in our lives.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 17-19, 1 Timothy 6:2-21

October 30, 2021
Follow Your Heart?

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 17-19](#), [1 Timothy 6:2-21](#)

“Just follow your heart.” It makes for a great Disney tune but it’s not a great philosophy for life. Unfortunately, our culture promotes this lie relentlessly. Everyone from Silicon Valley icons to Hollywood entertainers to academic luminaries to political activists to sports stars all share the same advice. “Follow your heart.” “Trust your gut.” “Believe in yourself.” “Do what your heart tells you and your mind will follow.” It sounds really good, doesn’t it? Almost biblical. It taps into our innermost longings. It affirms our secret desires. It seems like the only path to true happiness and joy.

Sadly, the opposite seems to be true. How many stories do we know of men and women who “followed their heart”, achieved international celebrity and great success, but lost their families in the process? How many stories do we hear of the secret lives of famous men and women that are filled with addiction, abuse, neglect, and trauma? How many experiences have we had where our “hearts” led us to some pretty dark and twisted places? Shoot, I could give you several examples from my own life where “following my heart” led me into a ditch. None of us start out intending to go there of course. None of us begin with bad intentions. We are simply human. We make mistakes. We are prone to failure. We can’t seem to get out of our own way.

So here’s the question...Why? Why is it that human beings seem so naturally bent towards self-destruction? Why, after tens of thousands of years, do we still exhibit a penchant for cruelty, hatred, greed, violence, and an unbridled lust for power? Jeremiah 17:9 offers us a clear and compelling diagnosis. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” These ancient words ring so true, do they not? We simply cannot trust our hearts. We cannot trust our feelings. We cannot trust our emotions. They change with the wind. They are influenced far too easily. The endorphin rush they create overrides our rationality. Eats away at our commitments. We find ourselves doing the very things we hate and not doing the things we love. We find ourselves wrapped up in all kinds of “wrong” when we know there’s a better, truer path to “right.” We find ourselves compromising or rationalizing all sorts of sin. It’s craziness. Literal insanity to trust in an organ that is so fickle and yet we seem to fall into this same trap over and over again.

So what’s the answer? We turn to the Lord. The One who made us and shaped us and formed us and fashioned us. The One who called us and claimed us as His own from eternity. The One who first established us and gave our lives purpose and meaning and showed us the way to true fulfillment. The One who would not abandon us in our sin but came to us. Suffered for us. Died for us. All to set us free so that we might live again. "I, the Lord, search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds." (Jeremiah 17:10)

Here is the fundamental question we have to answer on a daily, even hourly basis. Do we trust the One who created us and loved us or do we trust ourselves? Do we trust in the One whose love is always steadfast, loyal and true or do we trust our fickle, human hearts? Do we trust the One who never makes mistakes? Never falls down on the job? Never fails to deliver on His promises? Or do we trust the guy or gal in the mirror with the incredible spotty track record? The great news of the gospel is that we have a Good Father in heaven who delights in giving good gifts to His children. We have a gracious Savior who gave His own life to deliver us from slavery to sin. We have the Holy Spirit living inside us who promises to guide and direct and show us the way to true joy and everlasting peace. Trust Him today!

Readings for tomorrow: None