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November 1, 2021
War with God

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 20-23, 2 Timothy 1-2](#)

“I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and strong arm, in anger and in fury and in great wrath.” (Jeremiah 21:5) These might be some of the scariest words in all the Bible. Can you imagine what it must be like to be at war with God? To be in complete rebellion against your Creator? Not just ignoring His will but consciously, intentionally, even eagerly seeking to disobey? The sons of Josiah knew full well what they were doing. The priests and prophets of Jeremiah’s time were fully aware of their actions. The people of God who lived in the cities and villages were not ignorant of the commandments of God. They simply chose to ignore them. They simply chose to reject them. And the consequences of their actions are devastating.

Israel will go into exile in Babylon. They will lose their land. They will lose their homes. Their Temple will be raised to the ground. Their glory pounded into dust. Even worse, their God was now fighting on the side of the Chaldeans! No longer their Protector. No longer their Warrior. He who was for them is now against them. Who can resist His might? “I will turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands and with which you are fighting against the king of Babylon and against the Chaldeans who are besieging you outside the walls...I will strike down the inhabitants of this city, both man and beast. They shall die of a great pestilence...I will give Zedekiah king of Judah and his servants and the people in this city who survive the pestilence, sword, and famine into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and into the hand of their enemies, into the hand of those who seek their lives. He shall strike them down with the edge of the sword. He shall not pity them or spare them or have compassion.” (Jeremiah 21:4, 6-7) It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a Holy God!

And yet, even amidst this national catastrophe, Jeremiah sounds a note of hope. There will come a day when the sins of Israel have been paid and the Lord will visit His people once more. “I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord. “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’” (Jeremiah 23:3-6) As is so often the case in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament; it is always darkest before the dawn. The promise of a Messiah rises out of the ashes of their sin like a phoenix spreading its wings. David will not be abandoned. A righteous Branch shall come from his line. A king who will reign with justice and righteousness and wisdom. One who will restore the fortunes of God’s people. One who will defeat their great enemy once and for all so they may finally dwell secure. He will even have a name...יְהוָה צְדִיקָנוּ...“The Lord is our righteousness.”

Jesus is our righteousness, friends! God made Him who knew no sin to actually become sin on our behalf. To bear the full weight of the world’s sin. Past. Present. Future. He took all my sin. All my brokenness. All my fears. He took all my rebellion. All my rejection. All my disdain. He took all my selfishness. All my greed. All my lusts. And He nailed them to the cross. By His wounds, I am healed. By His brokenness, I am made whole. By His chains, I am set free. By His death, I am given new life.

The reality is my flesh is at war with God. The desires of my heart are bent towards evil. My thoughts and attitudes and actions are corrupt. And God is at war with me. His Spirit waging a battle for my

heart. He has invaded my life. Invaded the innermost depths of my being in order to cleanse me. Purify me. Refine me. He is a consuming fire. He will not rest until my life reflects His glory. And the more I surrender. The more I submit. The more I cooperate with the work of the Spirit, the more I will experience the freedom Christ promises. This is no easy task. The flesh and its desires must be crucified. Put to death. There can be no safe harbor for them in our souls. We must allow the Spirit to "save to the uttermost." We must open ourselves up fully and completely to His work. Only then will we be truly set free.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 24-26, 2 Timothy 3

November 2, 2021
A Prophetic Word

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 24-26, 2 Timothy 3](#)

Yesterday, I had a conversation with a good friend about my views on the state of the world. He felt I was taking too dismal an approach. He felt I was too down on humanity. Too cynical about her future. Too pessimistic about her ability to make progress. He is not a Christian so he does not believe in original sin. He does not believe in total depravity. He believes human beings are essentially good and just need to be loved in order to be successful in this world. So I challenged him in return. What evidence does he see in the world today that would suggest to him humanity - as a whole - is essentially good? One only has to consider the greed of the ultra-wealthy. The corruption rife in every human government. The lust for power and control. The objectification and abuse of women. The persistent hatred between tribes and ethnicities. The penchant for violence - physical, emotional, professional, personal - against those we consider our enemies. The selfishness of the average person. Shall I go on? Certainly, individuals are capable of great good as our groups of individuals but on the whole, on balance, when one honestly considers the natural state of humanity, it isn't good. It's almost as if the Apostle Paul had caught wind of it...

“But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.” (2 Timothy 3:1-5) Not much has changed in two thousand years. Humanity is still a wilderness calling for a voice. Still a dumpster fire desperate for water to put out her flames. Yes, we've made some progress. Yes, life expectancies have gone up. The amount of wealth we create on an annual basis is staggering. Technology has made life so much easier. But to what end? Why live longer in misery? Why pursue wealth when it so easily snares our hearts? Why innovate when such technology can be turned to horrifyingly destructive ends?

Please hear me out. I am not saying we shouldn't do these things just that we need to rediscover our purpose. Our chief end. Our primary goal which is “a godly life in Christ Jesus.” (2 Timothy 3:12) Without Jesus as our North Star. Without Jesus as our True North. Without Jesus leading the way, we fall into all sorts of error. We fall into all sorts of self-inflicted suffering and pain. We fall into all manner of evil and sin. Only Christ can lift us up out of the hole we've dug for ourselves. Only Christ can set our feet on a firm foundation rather than the shifting sand we too often choose for ourselves. Only Christ can satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts which is to be loved.

My friend was right about one thing. We all long to be loved. We all need to be loved. We all were made to be loved. Loved by God. Loved by others. The lack of love in our world is the fundamental issue we face. It is the scarcity of love that creates so much of the world's problems. None of this is new to God. He saw it in Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and all the generations down to Noah. He saw it in humanity after the Flood and identified a family through which He would reveal His great love to the world. But Abraham and Isaac and Jacob struggled with to love as well as did Moses and Joshua and David and Solomon and Israel. So God sent His one and only Son into the world. Jesus came with a mission to show the world the heights and depths of the love of God. He gave His very life to make God's love known. And all who look to Him in faith have received the gift of God's faithful, steadfast, everlasting, loyal, covenant love in return. This is the story the Bible tells and it's why we must spend time in God's Word every single day. To remind ourselves we are loved and to remind ourselves of the

charge to go and tell the world about the love we have found in Christ. This is why Paul tells Timothy, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Friends, God is equipping you for every good work. God is preparing you to be His instrument of love and grace in our world. God is getting you ready to endure the persecution that will come to all who truly seek to follow Jesus. Abide in God’s Word and let His Word abide in you. Abide in God’s love and let His love abide in you. Do all you can to live a godly life in Christ Jesus and you will find the peace and joy your heart longs for.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 27-28, 2 Timothy 4

November 3, 2021
False Prophets

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 27-28](#), [2 Timothy 4](#)

Lately, I've been listening to the podcast titled, "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill" and my heart is heavy. Though I do not know Mark Driscoll, I certainly have met too many like him. They are arrogant. They are narcissistic. They do not listen. They refuse any kind of real accountability. They abuse those around them. They groom and gaslight. They manipulate congregational systems for their own personal gain whether it be a lavish lifestyle or an influential platform. They are often celebrated until they fall. The warning signs dismissed because of the size of their "reach" or "impact." The victims who do have the courage to come forward often suffer further abuse as those in power close ranks around the abuser in order to protect themselves and the reputation of their ministry. I think of the systematic coverup by the Roman Catholic Church. Hundreds of priests abusing thousands of children over decades. I think of the late Ravi Zacharias who sexually abused hundreds of women over the span of his ministry. I think of spiritual abusers like Mark Driscoll or James MacDonald or many others who've caused so much suffering. Frankly, it all makes me want to vomit.

I wish I could say such incidents are rare but they are not. There are far too many false prophets running around these days. They masquerade as end times prophets, health and wealth preachers, and sexual predators who prey on their congregations. They are cult leaders. Religious charlatans. People who claim to speak for God but in reality are purveyors of hate. They defend the indefensible. They justify their abuses. They claim special anointing and protections from the Lord himself. And they lead many astray with their lies. Unfortunately, the religious life seems to attract such shady characters. Men - and it is almost exclusively men - whose character is utterly corrupt and who see the church as an easy mark. A soft target because of the grace she proclaims.

Sadly, it seems like such has always been the case. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, we have encountered many a false prophet. People claiming to speak for the Lord who are, in reality, seeking to hold onto their power. The man we meet in today's reading - Hananiah - is simply the latest in a long line of court prophets who seek to advance their position by flattering the king. Hananiah's message to Zedekiah is that he will defeat the Babylonians. God will break the yoke from their necks and set them free. It is clear pandering to maintain political privilege and power and it bears a striking resemblance to the many pastors of our day who sell out the gospel for a place at the political table. Both progressives and conservatives are guilty. Think Al Sharpton and Robert Jeffress and many others we could name. These are the kind of men of whom God speaks when He says, "I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied." (Jeremiah 23:21)

Friends, God will not be mocked. When Hananiah falsely prophesied a great victory over Babylon, Jeremiah foretold his doom. "Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie. Therefore thus says the Lord: 'Behold, I will remove you from the face of the earth. This year you shall die, because you have uttered rebellion against the Lord.'" In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died." (Jeremiah 28:15-17) Over the course of my short life, I have seen this pattern repeated over and over again. Those who speak falsely in the Lord's name are eventually exposed for the religious hucksters they have become. They fall into disgrace and the examples are legion. God will not allow His name to be spoken in vain. God will not be manipulated for our purposes or bent to our will. He will not share His glory with another and woe to any man or woman who declares falsely a Word from the Lord! Woe to any man or woman who calls evil "good" and good "evil!" Woe to any man or woman who would subvert the Word of God and twist it to serve

some other purpose! God is watching! He sits on His throne even now! He will expose what is done in secret! He will bring to light the sinful agendas of every human heart! Nothing is hidden from His sight!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 29-30, Titus 1

November 4, 2021
God's Good Plans

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 29-30, Titus 1](#)

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

If only I had a dollar for every time I've heard this verse quoted at a graduation, wedding, seen it on a t-shirt or coffee mug. It has become cliché. A platitude we like to use to support the fulfillment of our dreams and desires. It's also exhibit #1 as to why proof-texting can be so dangerous.

Jeremiah 29:11 is a verse embedded in a story. A tragic story. The story of Israel's exile. They have lost their home. They have been forcibly removed. (Think Trail of Tears or something like it...) Their leaders have been tortured and put to death. All of their cultural icons - including the Temple of God itself - have been razed to the ground. In short, their collective identity as the people of God has suffered a massive hit, leaving behind an emotional and spiritual crater that will not be easily filled. Especially as they try to rebuild in a foreign land.

Think about the collective shock we all felt on 9/11 when the planes hit both towers and the Pentagon. Think about the grief. The rage. The anger. Now multiply that many times over. Imagine terrorists taking over our country. Capturing our leaders. Torturing them on national television and executing them. Imagine them systematically destroying every monument we've ever built. Washington. Lincoln. Jefferson memorials all destroyed. Arlington. Mount Vernon. Monticello. All burned to the ground. Imagine them trying to erase “America” from the face of the earth. This is what the Israelites experienced and as they begin to settle into captivity...into slavery...into their new lives as refugees in a foreign land, they receive this letter from Jeremiah...

“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.” (Jeremiah 29:5-6) In essence, live your lives. Do what you've always done. Don't spend your days looking back at where you've been but forward to the future.

“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (Jeremiah 29:7) Pray for your enemies. For those who destroyed your way of life. For those who killed your loved ones. Conquered your land. Burned your cities. Destroyed your nation. And don't just pray. Actively seek to bless them. Bless their city. Bless their communities. Be salt and light in this new place.

“For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.” (Jeremiah 29:10) Settle in for the long haul. This is not going to be quick or easy. You will be in exile for generations. Your children and children's children will be born here. You may actually never return home yourselves.

Woof. Those are hard words when you know the context. And it is only AFTER all these difficult things have been said that Jeremiah pens the words we love to quote so much, “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me,

when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.” (Jeremiah 29:11-14)

Friends, the hard truth we don't like to think about very much is that God's plans for us sometimes include exile. Suffering. Hardship. Pain. God uses these things to smooth out the rough edges of our lives. To refine out all the impurity. To strain out all the sin. His "good" plan that gives us a "future and a hope" include taking us through the fire so that we can be made pure and holy as He is pure and holy. Seeking God with all our hearts means trusting Him with the direction of our lives...even when that direction doesn't appear to be comfortable or safe. It means letting Him lead and guide us into dark valleys where all we have is His presence. It means trusting the Good Shepherd to eventually find us green pastures and still waters though the journey may be long and arduous to get from here to there. This is what Jeremiah is trying to communicate to his people as they start their heartbreaking, gut-wrenching exile in Babylon. God is with them. He has not forgotten them. He will eventually redeem them. This is their hope! This is their future! And though they themselves may not actually get there, they can trust God will bring their descendants home.

Can you see some of the parallels to our day and age? Think of all the conflict raging in our nation today. Think of the competing worldviews and ideologies. Think of how challenging it is becoming to practice our faith in the public square. Think of how easy it is to be cynical or pessimistic and depressed about the future. And yet, isn't God still with us? Surely God has not forgotten us? So even though it may feel like we are entering a period of exile, we can trust that Jeremiah's words to his people hold great value for us today. We too should build our homes and plant our gardens. We too should get married and have families. We too should seek the blessing of the communities where God has planted us. We too should pray for them and work for their welfare. We too should settle in for the long haul for our current cultural drift is only picking up steam. Things will never go back to the way they once were. It's only going to get more challenging in the years ahead but God will be faithful! He will visit us! He will gather us! He will bring us back home!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 31-32, Titus 2

November 5, 2021

Recovery

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 31-32, Titus 2](#)

This morning I was thankful to read the recent report on the number of jobs added to the economy in the last month. It's good for people to go back to work. It's good for employers to fill empty positions. It's a strong sign that we are recovering from the devastation of the pandemic. But there is still so much work to be done. Not just in the economy. The last eighteen months has been traumatic for so many. I think of the first responders I know who've had to carry an enormous load of stress as they served on the front lines of this pandemic. I think of the healthcare professionals who have risked their lives and worked countless overtime shifts to care for their patients. I think of teachers who find themselves in the crosshairs of the culture wars that rage all around us. I think of our political leaders who work so hard to try to find a way out of this mess. Not to mention the parents who've had to balance homeschooling with working remotely or the business owners who've had to find ways to remain operational during enforced lockdowns. It's not been easy. We've experienced a collective shock to our system. A traumatic event that significantly impacted all of us emotionally, mentally, physically, even spiritually. It will take time to recover. It will take time to heal. It will take time to rebuild trust and find peace both as individuals and as a nation.

That's why I find such comfort in Jeremiah's words this morning... "Behold, I will gather them from all the countries to which I drove them in my anger and my wrath and in great indignation. I will bring them back to this place, and I will make them dwell in safety. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul." (Jeremiah 32:37-41) Yes, God in His divine Providence has allowed this pandemic. The pandemic, in turn, has exposed some of the deepest, darkest sins of our nation. The stain of racism. The vast economic inequalities. The injustices so many face on a daily basis. Layer in all the hatred and outrage and violence and vitriol we expose ourselves to through cable news, social media, or even some so-called "Christian" preaching. What you end up with is a toxic brew that we drink to the dregs. This is what God's judgment looks like in real time. It's when He simply withdraws His protective hand. Gives us over to the lusts and desires of our sinful hearts. Forces us to come face to face with the deadly consequences of our narcissism. And we would be lost but for His faithfulness.

Thankfully, the same words God gave Jeremiah to speak to the nation of Israel are the same words He speaks to us through His Son Jesus Christ. They are words of comfort. Words of hope. Words of promise. They speak of a future day when God Himself will wade back in. He will intervene to save us from ourselves. Save us from our individual and collective sin. He will restore the nation. He will renew His church. He will remember His people. How will we know the Day is drawing near? We will see a great movement of repentance. God's people will come together in humility to confess their sin, forgive each other, and reconcile their hurts. God's people will humbly confess their sins on behalf of our nation. They will work towards righteousness and justice which are the foundation of God's throne. They will show mercy and compassion to those who are poor and orphaned and abandoned and abused. They will sacrifice and serve and give generously, even extravagantly, for they God is their Protector and Provider. Most of all, they will walk in the fear of the Lord, giving Him all the reverence and honor He is due.

Our “recovery” is fundamentally tied to revival, friends. And revival can only come as God’s people humble themselves before the Lord. Confessing their sins. Admitting their mistakes. Acknowledging how far we have fallen short. God is gracious. He will forgive. God is faithful. He will cleanse us from all unrighteousness. And God expects the same from His people. To whom much is given, much is expected. To whom much is forgiven, much is expected. The healing and recovery we all long for - both individually and collectively - will only come as we extend forgiveness and grace and work to reconcile every relationship in Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 33-35, Titus 3

November 6, 2021
The Plain Meaning of Scripture

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 33-35, Titus 3](#)

One of the most important things to keep in mind when you are reading Scripture is to remember that the Bible was not written to us. It was written to different groups of people in different cultural contexts throughout history who had radically different ways of seeing and understanding the world around them. At the same time, while we acknowledge the Bible is not written directly to us, we do believe the Bible was written for us. Meaning we believe the lessons God was teaching His people throughout history are just as applicable today. What God was revealing about Himself is just as true for us as it was for them. This is why after thousands of years, we still find ourselves reading and studying this sacred book. It is inspired. It is infallible. It is inerrant on the matters on which it speaks. It is our only rule for faith and life.

In order to understand God's Word, there are often times when we have to dig deep into the cultural context to understand what's going on. We have to look back and try to understand how the original hearers of the Word would have received what the Biblical authors had to say. What frame of reference would they use? What worldview did they have? And the more obscure the text, the harder we have to work. However, there are other times when the Lord makes things very clear. There's little left to chance. Little left to interpretation. Little left to the imagination. There are times when the Lord speaks directly to us. He leaves no ambiguity. No wiggle room. No confusion. Today is one of those days. Listen to what the Apostle Paul has to say to Titus...

“Remind God's people to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people. For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people. But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.” (Titus 3:1-11)

Titus is a pastor. He leads a church planting movement on the island of Crete. Paul charges him to raise up leaders for these churches. People of godly character. People of good reputation. People who will be effective at leading God's people to live and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. What will such a people look like? Paul makes it very clear. They will be humble and submissive to their governing authorities. They will speak evil of no one. They will avoid arguments, quarreling, and fights. They will be gentle and will treat all people with respect. Why will God's people act in this particular, even peculiar way? Because they recognize they were once foolish and ignorant and enslaved to their passions. They were once angry and violent and given over to malice and hate. They too were once lost and wandering in helplessness, hopelessness, and fear. But now they have been found! The goodness and tender loving kindness of the Lord reached down to them and delivered them from their sin! They

have been set free by Jesus Christ and have now been made heirs according to His promise! This is why Paul insists that Titus insist that God's people walk in newness of life. They must devote themselves to good works. They must avoid unprofitable and worthless arguments that only lead to division.

I am a pastor. I lead a church in Parker and I help lead a church planting movement in the Horn of Africa. I train future pastors and church planters and missionaries in my work at Denver Seminary. Just as Paul charged Titus to raise up leaders for God's church in his context, so he is charging me to do the same. To raise up leaders of godly character. Leaders of good reputation. Leaders who will be effective in living and proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. Such leaders will be humble and submissive to their governing authorities no matter whether they are Democrat or Republican. They will speak evil of no one no matter their ethnicity, socio-economic status, political affiliation, religion, or sexual orientation. Such leaders will avoid arguments, quarreling, and fighting especially on social media. They will be gentle and treat all people with respect, refusing to make flippant and rude comments or share snarky and profane memes designed to tear others down. Why are these things out of bounds for the people of God? Because we too were once lost and wandering. We too were once enslaved to our passions. We too were once foolish and ignorant. But God was gracious towards us. He showed kindness and mercy towards us. He was good to us and therefore we must be good to others. We must exhibit the same tender loving kindness that God showed us to those around us. This is our calling as Christians. There are no exceptions. There are no excuses. There are no extenuating circumstances that give us a pass. We either obey Jesus or we do not. It's that simple.

Readings for tomorrow: None

November 8, 2021
My Will or Thy Will?

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 36-41](#), [Philemon 1](#), [Hebrews 1](#)

God's grace is truly amazing. No matter how bad things get. No matter how far we fall. No matter how fast we run. God is always quick to forgive. Quick to relent of the judgment our sin rightfully deserves. Jehoiakim is another in a long line of evil kings. Kings who reject the will of God. Kings who worship idols. Kings who seek their own glory and power instead of humbly serving God. Judgment is coming. Jeremiah has been sent to proclaim the impending doom. The sins of Israel have piled up over the years, creating a mess God intends to use Babylon to clean up. It's going to be ugly. It's going to be tragic. It's going to be painful. Many will suffer. Many will die. All they hold dear will be destroyed as God's justice rolls down on the earth.

But even now at the eleventh hour, there is hope. God's mercy makes one last appearance. God commands Jeremiah to speak a word of grace to the nation. To speak words of life instead of death. He gives them one last chance to repent and turn from their wicked ways. "Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today. It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the disaster that I intend to do to them, so that every one may turn from his evil way, and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin." (Jeremiah 36:2-3) Jeremiah obeys. He writes everything down on a scroll and gives it to his servant, Baruch, to proclaim. Baruch goes to the Lord's House and reads it in the presence of all who've gathered. Officials from the king's household hear the news and they ask Baruch to come and read the scroll to them. Eventually, the scroll makes it's way into the king's presence for one final hearing. The tension builds. How will the king respond? Will he repent? Will he turn back to the Lord? Will he humble himself and bow the knee? Sadly, the answer is no. He takes out a knife and cuts the scroll to pieces as each line is read and then proceeds to burn it in his fire pit. His rejection of the Word of God is complete and final. So is his doom.

One cannot so easily dispose of God's Word. It has a power all its own. Coming from the Holy Spirit, it is eternal. Unquenchable. Unflammable. Unbreakable. The grass may wither and the flower may fade but the Word of God endures forever. (Isaiah 40:8) So again the Word comes to Jeremiah. Only this time, judgment has replaced grace. Justice has replaced mercy. God's wrath is about to be fully unveiled. "Thus says the Lord, You have burned this scroll, saying, "Why have you written in it that the king of Babylon will certainly come and destroy this land, and will cut off from it man and beast?" Therefore thus says the Lord concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah: He shall have none to sit on the throne of David, and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day and the frost by night. And I will punish him and his offspring and his servants for their iniquity. I will bring upon them and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem and upon the people of Judah all the disaster that I have pronounced against them, but they would not hear." (Jeremiah 36:29-31)

I believe it was C.S. Lewis who pointed out that when we appear before the throne of God on Judgment Day, we will either say to Him, "Thy will be done" or He will say to us, "thy will be done." There are no other options. Furthermore, it is critically important to remember that our answer on Judgment Day is conditioned by the choices we make right now in our everyday lives. You see, each and every day we are faced with this same choice. Will we obey God's will for our lives or will we go our own way? It is a serious matter to reject the Word of God. To disobey His commands. Whether by ignorance or by deliberate defiance, we rebel against God to our own peril. God takes our sin seriously. Far more seriously than we know. He is so holy. So righteous. So just. His nose cannot bear the stench of sin. His

eyes will not behold the stain of sin. His presence will not endure even the appearance of sin. It must be dealt with. It must be done away with. A price must be paid. A sacrifice offered. It will either be us or it will be Christ. Either you receive Christ as your perfect sacrifice. Receive Christ as your perfect substitute. Receive Christ's atoning death on your behalf or you will bear the punishment yourself. You will receive all the judgment and righteous anger of God. It will be eternal and unending because the depth of your sin and rebellion is eternal and unending.

I know this sounds harsh. I know this doesn't feel good. What about God's love? It is there! In Christ! One cannot separate Christ from the love of God for Christ Himself is the love of God! "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." (1 John 4:10) God has provided a way for you to escape the coming judgment just as He provided a way for Jehoiakim to escape his coming judgment! Repentance! Faith! Accepting the perfect sacrifice God Himself has offered on your behalf! Do not reject the Word of God, friends! Receive Christ and live!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 42-43, Hebrews 2

November 9, 2021
Running from God

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 42-43](#), [Hebrews 2](#)

Deion Sanders is one of the most amazing athletes of all time. He is the only person to participate in both a World Series and a Super Bowl, winning two of the latter. He was a nine-time All-Pro cornerback and kick returner who moonlighted as a professional baseball player. Everything the man touched seemingly turned to gold and he had the ego to match. He gave himself the nickname "Prime Time." He was loud and brash and cocky to a fault. And yet, all that success could not satisfy so in 1997 - at the height of his success - he drove his car off a cliff in an effort to commit suicide. Incredibly enough, he survived the 30-40 foot drop with no significant injuries and it was then that he began to turn his life over to the Lord. I once heard him remark in an interview, "I was one of the fastest human beings on the face of the planet but I could not outrun God."

I imagine all of us know what it's like to run from God. All of us at one time or another in our lives have tried to run as fast and as far as we can from Him. Perhaps we were running from faith like Sanders. Perhaps we were running from obedience like the rich young ruler Jesus met one day. Perhaps we were running from hardship and suffering like the disciples in the wake of the crucifixion. Perhaps we were running from His call on our lives like the Old Testament prophet, Jonah. Whatever the circumstances, I imagine all of us can think of a time where we ran from the Lord. Here's my question...how'd that work out for you? ;-) I know how it worked out for me. God was relentless. He pursued me tirelessly. He ran me down. I never did have much of a chance.

Neither did Israel or Jeremiah. You can understand their thinking. You can sympathize with their point of view. Their whole world has just been destroyed by Babylon. They've witnessed firsthand the horrors of war. The futility of trying to resist. And now the very governor Nebuchadnezzar appointed to rule in his stead has been murdered. Surely his vengeance will be swift and total and final. Surely he will return and wipe out everyone who's left. So they make a plan. They will flee to Egypt. Take refuge in a rival empire. Surely the arm of Nebuchadnezzar cannot reach them there. But before they go, they seek the Lord. They want the Lord to confirm their well-laid plans. God tells them something different. He calls them to surrender. He calls them to humble submission. He calls on them to plead for mercy. If they will trust the Lord with their lives - even in the face of their fear and anxiety and hardship and suffering - He promises He will deliver them. Listen again to what the Lord says to His people, "If you will remain in this land, then I will build you up and not pull you down; I will plant you, and not pluck you up; for I relent of the disaster that I did to you. Do not fear the king of Babylon, of whom you are afraid. Do not fear him, declares the Lord, for I am with you, to save you and to deliver you from his hand. I will grant you mercy, that he may have mercy on you and let you remain in your own land. But if you say, 'We will not remain in this land,' disobeying the voice of the Lord your God and saying, 'No, we will go to the land of Egypt, where we shall not see war or hear the sound of the trumpet or be hungry for bread, and we will dwell there,' then hear the word of the Lord, O remnant of Judah. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: If you set your faces to enter Egypt and go to live there, then the sword that you fear shall overtake you there in the land of Egypt, and the famine of which you are afraid shall follow close after you to Egypt, and there you shall die. All the men who set their faces to go to Egypt to live there shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence. They shall have no remnant or survivor from the disaster that I will bring upon them." (Jeremiah 42:9-17)

God is giving His people a clear choice. One with real life consequences. Obey the Lord even in the face of their fear and anxiety, suffering and hardship and they will be blessed. God will protect them.

God will re-plant them. God will build them up in the land. Disobey the Lord. Run to Egypt. And surely God's judgment will find them. The violence they are trying to escape will follow them. The famine they are trying to avoid will be waiting for them there. All who go to Egypt will die there. None shall escape. It's a choice between life or death and Jeremiah implores them to choose life. Sadly, they choose death and bring on themselves further judgment. All because they tried to outrun God.

Where do you find yourself today? Are you still running from God? Are you still seeking to flee His presence? Live life your own way? Follow your own heart? Satisfy your own desires? Or perhaps you find yourself exhausted? Worn out by the rat race? Tired of chasing the brass ring? Maybe like Sanders, you've caught the ring. You've achieved success. You've made your way to the top only to find it lonely. Isolating. Deeply unfulfilling. Friends, God is going to relentlessly pursue you until the day you die. He will never stop fighting for you. Never stop reaching out to you. Never stop coming after you because He longs for all to be saved and come to knowledge of His truth. He longs for all to know the love and grace He offers in Jesus Christ. Will you stop running and turn to Him today?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 44-45, Hebrews 3:1-4:13

November 11, 2021
Our Great High Priest

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 46-48](#), [Hebrews 4:14-5:10](#)

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

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

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

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

Listen again to how the author of Hebrews describes it, “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin...In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.” (Hebrews 4:14-15, 5:7-10)

Friends, this is what makes Jesus unique. Superior to every angel and every prophet who has come before or after Him. He plays His unique, high priestly role even now on your behalf. He lives to make intercession for you. His sacrifice on your behalf has been accepted. All the necessary work of salvation is finished. “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:16)

Readings for tomorrow: [Jeremiah 49-50](#), [Hebrews 5:11-6:12](#)

November 12, 2021

Discernment

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 49-50](#), [Hebrews 5:11-6:12](#)

I love what Hebrews 5:12-14 says, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.” Discernment rests on our ability to become “skilled in righteousness” or skilled in God’s ways. If we walk in His love. If we obey His commands. If we submit our lives to Him, we can know the will of God for our lives.

One of the most important gifts we can exercise is an ability to discern between right and wrong. Good and evil. God’s will and our own will. Consider the proliferation of fake news. The tacit acceptance of deceit as a necessary means to a greater ideological end. The promotion of false information in both the mainstream and social media. It’s literally tearing us apart as a nation. Why? Because our powers of discernment have not been trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. Tragically, this has been a problem for God’s people for centuries.

Anyone remember King Saul? The first king of Israel. Saul is the man God hand-selected from among the twelve tribes to lead His people. Saul is a strong man. A valiant man. He literally stands head and shoulders above his peers. But he is not a wise man. He is not a discerning man. He makes rash decisions. He takes vows in the name of the Lord that come back to haunt him. He is often his own worst enemy and it eventually costs him everything. For example, consider the time his son Jonathan won a great victory for Israel. He and his armor bearer undertook a dangerous, potentially even suicidal, mission. They invaded the camp of the Philistines. They killed twenty men and the result was chaos. The Philistine army started to panic and raced in every direction. Saul sees the confusion and takes advantage of it. He marshals the rest of his army and sends them after the Philistines. God gives them a great victory. However, in his zeal, Saul issues an edict that no Israelite shall eat until their defeat of the Philistines is complete. The battle is hard. The fighting is fierce. God’s people grow faint. In the midst of it all, Jonathan - who didn’t know about his father’s command - eats some honey and it strengthens him. He openly questions his father’s wisdom. The people follow his example, slaughtering animals for a feast. The news gets back to Saul. He interprets their actions as sin. He attempts to talk to the Lord who remains silent through the whole episode. In response to God’s silence, Saul casts lots to determine who has broken his command. It’s Jonathan. In his foolishness, he decides to kill him but the people of God stand in his way.

The whole story is a mess. It’s a confusing jumble and hard to follow. But it points to what happens when human beings take matters into their own hands. When we fail to discern the difference between God’s will and our own. How often do we make this mistake? How many times over the course of my life have I pursued something out of pride or selfish desire, foolishly assuming it to be God’s will? How often have I grown impatient and rushed into a decision I later regretted? If I am completely honest, there have even been times in my life where I chased something I knew to be sin but did it anyway, hypocritically asking God for forgiveness in advance.

So how do we discern the will of God? First, we have to know God’s Word. We have to study His commands. We have to commit ourselves to obey His divine Law. It is never God’s will that you disobey Him. It is never God’s will that you live out of alignment with Jesus. Second, we have to ask

God for wisdom. The wisdom to faithfully follow Jesus. God promises in James 1:5 to give this wisdom generously to all who ask. So we pray in faith, trusting God to keep His promises. Finally, we learn through constant, daily practice to discern the difference between good and evil. Right and wrong. God's will and our will. There is a process of trial and error here as we get better at listening to God's voice above our own or the voices in our world. Friends, let me encourage you to put Hebrews 5 into practice. Train yourself for righteousness. Strengthen your powers of discernment. Then teach others to do the same.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 51-52, Hebrews 6:13-7:10

November 13, 2021
God's War with Sin

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 51-52](#), [Hebrews 6:13-7:10](#)

Exile from the Garden. Death in the Great Flood. Confusion at the Tower of Babel. Plagues in Egypt. Conquest of Canaan. What do all these biblical events have in common? God's perpetual war against evil. God has made it clear from the beginning of time that He will not allow humanity to persist in sin. Just as He did not allow Adam and Eve to stretch out their hand and eat of the Tree of Life in the Garden after their sin, so He will not allow us to go on living in idolatry. God hates sin. He hates the idolatry of our hearts. He hates unrighteousness. He hates evil.

Now I want to be very clear here. Just because God hates sin DOES NOT mean He hates sinners. Just because God hates idolatry DOES NOT mean He hates those who make the idols. God loves the world. God loves His creation. God loves those made in His image. And because His love is fierce and loyal and steadfast and true, He hates what sin does to us. He hates how it corrupts us. He hates how it breaks us. He hates how dehumanizes us. He hates how it consumes us and enslaves us. In this way, God's "hatred" is strangely comforting. It is strangely comforting to know God hates my sin so much He would die on a cross for me. It is strangely comforting to know God hates my sin so much He would send His Spirit to indwell me and sanctify me. It is strangely comforting to know God hates my sin so much He gives me the opportunity to repent and return to Him an almost infinite number of times. And what is true for me is also true for entire communities. Cities. Nations.

As we finish the book of Jeremiah, we see God leveling His judgment on the nations. God sets out to destroy the Ammonites. To punish them for their sin. The discipline of God is harsh and brutal and terrifying. But the section ends with a strange promise. God will restore the fortunes of the Ammonites. God sets out to destroy Elam. To punish them for their sin. The discipline of God is harsh and brutal and terrifying. But again, there is this strange promise. God will restore the fortunes of Elam.

God set out to destroy His own people. The nation of Israel in both its northern and southern kingdoms. "Israel is a hunted sheep driven away by lions. First the king of Assyria devoured him, and now at last Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has gnawed his bones." (Jeremiah 50:17) He punished them for their sin. The discipline of God was harsh and brutal and terrifying. But now the tables turn. The very instruments God used to bring about His discipline now come under His judgment. Where is the might of Assyria? What happened to her? Her meteoric rise in human history was matched by her sudden fall. The same is true for Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar was the mightiest ruler of his time but his empire would not last. Why? Jeremiah is clear. "I will repay Babylon and all the inhabitants of Chaldea before your very eyes for all the evil that they have done in Zion, declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 51:24) You see, Nebuchadnezzar didn't just go to war with Israel, he went to war with God Himself.

Psalm 2:1-6 says, "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." No one can resist God's power. No one can match His might. It is God who holds the fate of the nations in His hands. God who directs their paths. It is God who sets their courses. God who causes them to rise and fall according to His will and His plan. No one escapes God's judgment. No one can hide from His sight. No one can run from His presence. God is on the march! He will not rest until the whole earth is cleansed. He will not relent

until the whole earth repents and turns to Him. He will not let up until sin and evil is utterly defeated and destroyed.

Friends, what was true for the Ammonites, Edomites, and Elamites or for great city-states like Damascus or tribal nations like Kedar and Hazar or for world empires like Babylon will also be true for us. God still sits enthroned on high. God still reigns over every square inch of the earth. God still rules the nations of the earth. He is at work even now bringing about His justice and righteousness. He is at work even now bringing an end to systems of injustice, oppression, and exploitation. He is fighting to reform political, economic, and social structures so they better represent His sovereign will and plan. He is fighting for every human heart to put an end to fear. An end to rage. An end to hate. Of course we fight Him for every square inch of territory. We rebel. We resist. We hurt. We wound. We even kill. We refuse to bend the knee. And God only increases the pressure. His hand grows even more heavy upon us. He will not relent until He has it all. Every heart. Every home. Every church. Every business. Every political system. Every governing structure. He will never stop until our nation finally bends her knee to Him.

So how should we respond? Humility. Confession. Repentance. Joy. For this same God of judgment has promised to show us mercy and make all things new if we will but submit to Him. He has promised one day to wipe away all our tears. Eliminate all pain and suffering. Gather His children to Himself in glory to live forever safe and secure in His loving arms. Turn to God, friends. Suffer under His discipline no longer. Pray for our nation to turn to God! Pray for God's Spirit to cleanse us and sanctify us and give us a heart that beats for Jesus alone.

Readings for tomorrow: None

November 15, 2021
The Pervasiveness of Sin

Readings for today: [Lamentations 1-5](#), [Hebrews 7:11-28](#)

There is a debate raging in our culture today. Is sin systemic or is it personal? Is sin communal or is it individual? Are we guilty of sin as we participate and perhaps unwittingly perpetuate sinful systems of injustice and oppression or are we only guilty of the sin we personally commit? The Bible's answer is "yes." It's not an either/or but a both/and.

We have to remember that while the Bible was written for us, it was not written to us. In the case of the Book of Lamentations, it was written to people living in an ancient near east, honor/shame culture where the group identity of a particular people was far more important than the individual identity. In fact, you would be hard-pressed to get an ancient Israelite to even understand what an "individual" identity might look like apart from his or her community. When God brings judgment on the nation for the sins they've committed, they would have understood it as the just punishment for their collective guilt. The righteous action of a holy God against His people for the sin that has been building up over generations. The author of Lamentations says as much when he writes, "Our fathers sinned, and are no more; and we bear their iniquities." (Lamentations 5:7) He suggests as much when he personifies Jerusalem and gives her a collective voice in the narrative.

"How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave...Jerusalem remembers in the days of her affliction and wandering all the precious things that were hers from days of old. When her people fell into the hand of the foe, and there was none to help her, her foes gloated over her; they mocked at her downfall. Jerusalem sinned grievously; therefore she became filthy; all who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans and turns her face away...Look, O Lord, and see, for I am despised. Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger. From on high he sent fire; into my bones he made it descend; he spread a net for my feet; he turned me back; he has left me stunned, faint all the day long. My transgressions were bound into a yoke; by his hand they were fastened together; they were set upon my neck; he caused my strength to fail; the Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot withstand." (Lamentations 1:1, 7-8, 11-14)

Conversely, we live in a guilt/innocence culture where everything is viewed through a highly individualistic lens. As such, we believe each person must be held accountable for their own choices in life. They must be responsible for their own actions. Therefore any and all punishment - if it is to be just - must be leveled against individuals for the crimes they've personally committed. And, to be sure, this idea is also present throughout Lamentations. We see Jeremiah lifting his own lament in the pages of this book. Acknowledging his own sin, suffering, and pain. Chapter three, in particular, seems to reflect Jeremiah's experience.

"I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath; he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long. He has made my flesh and my skin waste away; he has broken my bones; he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation; he has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago. He has walled me about so that I cannot escape; he has made my chains heavy; though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer; he has blocked my ways with blocks of stones; he has made my paths

crooked...Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me.” (Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-20)

We get no sense from Jeremiah that he is innocent or that he should escape or be protected from God’s righteous judgment. Instead, Jeremiah suffers the penalty for his sin and that of his nation. He accepts God’s judgment as just and then looks to Him for hope even in the midst of all he is going through. “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord...For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men.” (Lamentations 3:21-26, 31-33)

Now I know we struggle with God’s judgment. We struggle with its severity. We struggle with its seeming cruelty. We think to ourselves, “What about the innocent? Why do the righteous suffer alongside the unrighteous? What have the children or the poor or the outcast or the marginalized done who get caught up in this terrible holocaust?” These are thoroughly modern and thoroughly western cultural questions. In the Bible’s view, no one is innocent. All are born into sin. All are born under judgment. All bear the guilt of our forefather and mother, Adam and Eve. We confirm our collective guilt each and every time we act in selfish and self-centered ways. As the Apostle Paul puts it, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned...But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many...Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 5:12, 15, 18-21)

You see, as much as we may want to deny the idea of collective guilt, we absolutely cling to the idea of collective righteousness. As much as we may want to deny the idea that we are held accountable for the sins of our fathers and mothers, we absolutely want to believe we are set free by the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We can’t have one without the other and the great news of the gospel is the sacrifice of Christ is sufficient for all sin. Individual and collective. Personal and communal. Systemic and singular. When Christ died, He died once for all. He made atonement not just for our individual sins but for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2)

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 1-3, Hebrews 8

November 16, 2021

Visions

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 1-3](#), [Hebrews 8](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What is the content of the revelation Ezekiel receives? He is called to be a prophet. He is called to be a "watchman" for Israel. He will speak God's Word to His people. He will embody God's messages

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

And what will the confrontation look like? Well, consider the strange scene we'll read about tomorrow in chapter four where Ezekiel lays on his side for 390 days and 40 days respectively to atone for the sins of each kingdom. The 390 days represents the 390 years between the apostasy of Jeroboam of the Northern Kingdom of Israel when he set up idols for his people to worship and the Babylonian Captivity that Ezekiel is now experiencing. (975-c. 583 BC) The forty days represents the final years of apostasy of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Taken together, the 430 days, representing 430 years, matches the same number of years Israel was enslaved in Egypt before the Exodus. And this vision is intended to convey hope for the same God who delivered His people slavery in Egypt is the same God who will deliver them from bondage in Babylon. God will repeat what He has done and save them again but only after they have returned to Him with all their hearts.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 4-6, Hebrews 9

November 17, 2021
The Purpose of Judgment

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 4-6](#), [Hebrews 9](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 7-9, Hebrews 10

November 18, 2021
Strike Fire!

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 7-9, Hebrews 10](#)

I know I've been focusing on the Old Testament quite a bit in my devotionals lately but today I want to turn to our New Testament reading and reflect a bit. Whoever the author of Hebrews is, he is intimately familiar with the Old Testament. He is also skilled at Jewish midrash which is an interpretive method that infused fresh meaning into the biblical texts. Jesus is his interpretive lens. He looks back on the ceremonial religious laws of the Torah and reinterprets them in light of Christ. The priesthood, sacrifices, and Temple are all reimagined. The high points of Israel's history are revisited as are the great heroes and heroines of the faith. It's like a fog has lifted for the author and they are seeing things clearly for the very first time.

Many years ago, I had LASIK surgery on my eyes. I have worn glasses since the fourth grade. My vision was terrible. I was as near-sighted as they come. Then I had the procedure. I remember walking out of the office and it was literally like scales had been lifted from my eyes. I could actually see things like the alarm clock in the morning or the individual leaves on the tree in my front yard. It was an incredible feeling.

I imagine the author of Hebrews felt the same way. You can almost feel the energy coming off the page. If you listen closely, you can sense his excitement and joy as he shares what he's discovered. Now it all makes sense! Now it all has become clear! This is why God instituted the sacrificial system and this is how God brings that system to fulfillment! His own Son serves both as High Priest and Perfect Sacrifice. He bears His own Body into the Holy of Holies in the heavenly Temple and satisfies the just demands of God's Law once and for all. This is the mystery of salvation all of our forefathers and mothers in the faith looked forward to and now it is ours to see and to touch and to taste! The promised new covenant has been given. The new age inaugurated. The gates of heavenly Jerusalem thrown open. The angels gathered, along with the saints who have gone before us, to join the party. A gift is being offered. An unshakable kingdom that will never fall for it's foundation is Christ Himself!

Can you feel it? Can you sense the passion behind his words? The excitement? The energy? It comes to a crescendo in passages like the one we read today. "Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." (Hebrews 10:19-25) You can almost hear him shout these last words, amen?

Friends, the gift God offers us in Christ is nothing short of heaven itself. Through Him we receive eternal life in an eternal relationship with an eternal God who reserves a place for us in His eternal Kingdom. To Him be all the praise, honor and glory forever!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 10-12, Hebrews 11:1-16

November 19, 2021
The Glory of the Lord

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 10-12](#), [Hebrews 11:1-16](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 13-15, Hebrews 11:17-40

November 20, 2021

By Faith

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 13-15, Hebrews 11:17-40](#)

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: None

November 22, 2021
The Gospel according to Ezekiel

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 16-20](#), [Hebrews 12-13](#)

Today's reading isn't easy. But if one can get past the graphic imagery of chapter 16, one will see a compelling picture of the gospel emerge. A gospel that is as much for Israel as it is for the church today. In this chapter, God retells their national story from His point of view. He reminds them of their humble beginnings. Reminds them of His lavish blessings. Reminds them of their great betrayal. Reminds them of His everlasting covenant. This is their story. This is our story. This is the gospel story.

Where does our relationship with God begin? Not with us. We did not choose to love God. We could not choose to love God. No, we were helpless like babes. Abandoned. Left all alone. Stillborn spiritually. It was not our beauty that caught God's eye but our desperation. "And as for your birth, on the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things to you out of compassion for you, but you were cast out on the open field, for you were abhorred, on the day that you were born. And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!'" (Ezekiel 16:4-6) Out of pure compassion and grace, God adopted us as His own. Brought us into His family. Took us from the field where we had been cast. Bathed us. Fed us. Clothed us. Rocked us. Sang to us. Raised us. "I made you flourish like a plant of the field. And you grew up and became tall and arrived at full adornment. Your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare." (Ezekiel 16:7)

What does our relationship with God look like as it matures? We grow up under His watchful eye and gracious care. When the time is right, God takes us as His bride. He covers our nakedness with the corner of His garment. He makes His vow and covenant with us. He bestows riches and honor and glory on us as befits the bride of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And the whole world marvels at what God has done. Just like the whole world came to see the splendor and glory of Israel. The whole world envied the relationship she had with her God.

But Israel grew proud. She began to believe her own hype. She read her own press clippings. She trusted in her riches and beauty and power and influence. She abandoned her covenant with the Lord and began to serve other gods. God's bride was now playing the whore. She literally took the gifts God had given her and gave them away to idols. Fed them with the bread God provided from His own hands. Things got so bad Israel began sacrificing their innocent children to appease those other bloodthirsty gods. "How sick is your heart, declares the Lord God, because you did all these things, the deeds of a brazen prostitute..." (Ezekiel 16:30)

Therefore God brings judgment on His bride. "For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God..." (1 Peter 4:17) God will not spare His bride. In fact, He holds His bride to an even higher standard. Higher than Samaria. Higher than Sodom. "Bear your disgrace, you also, for you have intervened on behalf of your sisters. Because of your sins in which you acted more abominably than they, they are more in the right than you. So be ashamed, you also, and bear your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous." (Ezekiel 16:52) God disciplines those He loves out of a desire to see them cleansed from sin and brought to glory. "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son or daughter whom he receives." (Hebrews 12:5-6) His desire is for His bride to return. To come back to Him. To be faithful and true once more. To remember from whence she came and to

honor her Husband for all He has done. Why? So the world may again marvel at the intimacy of their relationship. So the world may again say, "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?" (Deuteronomy 4:7)

This is why Ezekiel 16 ends with a note of hope. "Yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant...I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the Lord, that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I atone for you for all that you have done, declares the Lord God." (Ezekiel 16:60, 62-63) God has atoned for His bride. On the cross, He paid for all her sin. He took all her punishment. All her shame. All her self-inflicted degradation on Himself. On the cross, the faithful Husband gave His life for the sake of His bride "so that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." (Ephesians 5:27)

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 21, James 1

November 23, 2021
The Problem with Anger

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 21](#), [James 1](#)

“For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” (James 1:20)

I still remember when God hit me right between the eyes with this verse. It was several years ago and I was struggling with one of my children. We were locked in perpetual conflict. Every conversation seemed to end in an argument. Our voices would raise. Our bodies would shake. Threats would be made. Things would often spiral out of control. Our relationship was deeply broken. Now I could give you all sorts of reasons why I felt justified in my anger. I could even support my reasons biblically. I am a pastor after all. But none of that mattered when I read these words from James 1:20. I realized I had no excuse. My anger could never be righteous. My justifications - as good as they were - ultimately fell flat in the face of the fact that I was losing my child. Something needed to change. We went to counseling. The Christian counselor asked me a simple question, “Have you ever seen anything positive come from your anger?” It felt like a paraphrase of James 1:20 and it cut me to the heart. From that moment on, I made a commitment to my child that I would do all I could to redirect my anger. To choose a different path. To react in a more positive, more peaceful, more godly way. I repented. I humbled myself before my child. I asked for their forgiveness. And we made a new beginning.

I wish I could tell you I never did get angry again. That is not true. It took some time and a lot of fasting and praying for my heart to change. My reactions by this point in time in my life were pretty ingrained. But as I continued to bring the broken pieces of my heart before the Lord and the broken pieces of my relationship with my child before the Lord, I began to heal. I began to mend. I began to see the fruit of a different approach. One based on grace and acceptance and encouragement and unconditional love. Fast forward several years. My child and I have a great friendship. One built on mutual respect and love. Despite all my fears and anxieties over their future - much of which drove my anger in the first place - they are doing great. They work hard. They are responsible. They are building a great life for themselves. And I am thankful.

One of the great lies circulating through our world today is that human anger can somehow be righteous. We rage against injustice. Rage against abuse. Rage against suffering. Rage against tyranny. It doesn't matter which side of the political aisle you are on. It doesn't matter where you fall on the social spectrum. Everyone seems angry these days and I get it. Anger is a powerful emotion. It makes us feel strong and good and righteous. Sadly, it is not sustainable. The adrenaline rush does eventually wear off. We run out of steam. Our pent up energy eventually dissipates leaving us feeling weak and vulnerable. And then we have to face the fallout. The people we've hurt along the way. The bodies we've left in our wake. The wounds we've created as we've lashed out. It's vicious cycle.

How different things would be if we followed the advice of James? What if we were quick to hear? Slow to speak? Slow to anger? What if we obeyed with meekness and humility the Word of God which is able to save our souls? What if we were doers of the Word and not just hearers? What if we practiced what we preached? What if overcame evil with good? Overcame hate with love? Overcame sin with grace? What if we patterned our life after the life of Jesus?

Things have radically changed in my home as a result of me putting away my anger. My children no longer are fearful of dad's eruption. My wife no longer has to do damage control after dad loses his cool. Our relationships are closer. The bonds of love we share are tighter. Yes, we still make mistakes. Yes, we still have to have hard conversations. Yes, we still have to confront disobedience and enforce

boundaries and there are consequences when the rules are not followed or responsibilities not kept. But by God's grace we are making great progress as we rely on the power of God's love rather than the power of human anger to find our way.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 22-24, James 2

November 24, 2021

Justice

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 22-24, James 2](#)

This morning the news came down that the three men who killed Ahmaud Arbery were found guilty of murder. This is a good thing. It is a just and righteous verdict. It gives us yet another reason to hope that we are making progress as a nation when it comes to ending racial discrimination. It also serves as a sober reminder of the work we have yet to do. It's important to keep in mind that without the video being leaked to the media, the suspects might never have been arrested. The trial might never have happened. Justice might never have been done. So there is still much work left to do.

Many years ago, I had the privilege of serving as a volunteer chaplain at New Jersey State Prison. This is the maximum security facility for the state and, at that time, was also the location of death row. (The death penalty has since been abolished in New Jersey.) Most of the inmates had been convicted of some form of violent crime and were serving long sentences as a result. However, as I began to hear their stories and study the data from within the system, it became readily apparent to me that race and socio-economics had a significant and disproportionate influence on the types of charges filed, conviction rates, substance of plea deals, and sentencing outcomes. Those who could hire a private lawyer were far better off than those assigned a public defender. Those who were white were often treated differently than blacks or Latinos. Even adjusting for human error could not account for the disparities within the system. (For those looking for great research on the topic, check out the Equal Justice Initiative led by Bryan Stevenson at <https://eji.org>.)

What does all this have to do with today's reading? I'm glad you asked. ;-) James begins his second chapter with these words, "My brothers and sisters, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." (James 2:1) He goes on to warn his fellow believers against showing favoritism to the rich and dismissing those who are poor. Catering to the powerful while ignoring the powerless. He reminds them that God Himself identifies with the poor and powerless, including the Jews themselves who were chosen by God when they were slaves in Egypt! "Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?" (James 2:5) Tragically, for too much of our history as a nation, we have tended to let factors like race and economics and gender influence far too many outcomes. We have been guilty of showing partiality to those who are rich and powerful and white and male, giving them the benefit of the doubt. Consider not just the disparities highlighted by the case cited above but sexual abuse cases like the one against Larry Nasser or many Roman Catholic clergy or several high profiled evangelical pastors in recent years. Consider how differently Felicity Huffman was treated when compared to Kelley Williams-Bolar. Huffman is a white, wealthy, and well-known actress who bribed an SAT proctor with \$15,000 to illegally change her daughter's answers so she could get into a good college. She got fourteen days in federal prison, a \$30,000 fine, and 250 hours of community service. Williams-Bolar used her father's address to redistrict her children to get them into a better public school and was originally sentenced to five years in prison! Yes, her sentence was eventually reduced to ten days in jail and three years probation - thankfully - but the point still remains. We all have natural, sinful tendency to privilege some over others.

So what are we to do? We cling to the gospel. The gospel declares that those who were dead in their trespasses (death penalty) have been made alive through Christ! Those who were once trapped in spiritual poverty have now been made rich in faith and heirs to God's Kingdom! Those who were once defined by their race, gender, or socio-economic status have now become one in Christ Jesus! This is the foundation on which true justice is built and it is the only way forward for the church, for our communities, and for our nation.

Readings for tomorrow: [Ezekiel 25-26, James 3](#)

November 25, 2021
Watching our Words

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 25-26, James 3](#)

“The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, these things ought not to be so.” (James 3:6-10)

Reading these words today makes me wonder if James looked into the future and saw the dumpster fire that is social media these days! Everything from our national discourse down to the conversations we have around so many dinner tables only serves to prove James’ point about the untamable tongue. How many fires are started by careless words? How much violence is stoked by those who peddle lies? How much damage is done to people and to communities all across our country because some choose to weaponize their words to further their own selfish ends? Indeed the whole body that is America has become stained. Our entire way of life set on fire. So many relationships ended due to the restless evil and deadly poison that is spreading throughout our land. All because we can’t seem to tame our tongue. We can’t seem to control our words. We refuse to follow grandma’s advice, “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say it at all.”

Sadly, far too many Christians are leading the charge. Rather than submit their words to Christ, they throw gasoline on the dumpster fire that’s raging. They speak out of both sides of their mouth. Praising God one minute and cursing those made in the image of God the next. Rather than offer a gentle answer to turn away wrath, they respond in kind and the flames only rise higher. Rather than overcome evil with good, they retaliate with “an eye for an eye” mentality and the fire only burns hotter. Rather than embrace humility and gentleness like our Lord, they feel the need to be prideful and arrogant, rude and abrasive, and the conflagration burns out of control. They are highly critical of everyone but themselves. They sing of God’s amazing grace but then refuse to extend it to anyone who might disagree with them. They assume the worst of their opponents and refuse to love their enemies. One might think James had caught wind of it or perhaps this is simply the way Christians have always acted.

My brothers and sisters, these things ought not to be so. The same mouth that praises God should not damn those made in His image. The same mouth that blesses should not curse. Imagine how different our world would be if those who claimed to follow Christ simply took these words to heart? Imagine how different our interactions would be if those who claimed to follow Christ refused to vent their anger and frustration but instead carried it to the Lord? Imagine how different our communities would be if those who claimed to follow Christ seasoned their words with love and grace and joy and peace? Imagine how different your Thanksgiving would be if you simply sought to bless each and every person who came to your home and sat around your table?

Readings for tomorrow: [Ezekiel 27-28, James 4](#)

November 26, 2021
The Deadly Sin of Pride

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 27-28](#), [James 4](#)

One of the besetting sins of humanity is pride. Like Adam, we all want to become our own gods. Human history is replete with example after example of what happens when a person or tribe or nation achieves a certain measure of power, wealth, and privilege. They become proud. Arrogant. They forget God. They ignore God. They replace God. The most megalomaniacal even believe they've become God.

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

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

I know I've shared this before but it's worth mentioning here again. Several years ago, the Lord spoke to me during a time of prayer. You see, I am as ambitious as the next person. I am as prideful as any. My heart longs for success and recognition. I too would love to see my name in lights. So the Lord confronted me. And He gave me three words to guide the rest of my life...

Obscurity: God has commanded me to labor in obscurity. To be content with where He puts me. He has made it clear that I never seek another position. Never seek another raise. Never seek another opportunity. I am simply to walk with open hands before Him and let Him fill them with whatever He desires for my life.

Anonymity: God has commanded me to embrace anonymity. He has made it clear that I am never to self-promote. Never seek to make my name great. Never seek out recognition or pride of place. I am to spend my life and ministry promoting others above myself and let them have all the credit.

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 29-31, James 5

November 27, 2021
Effective Prayer

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 29-31, James 5](#)

“Is any among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” (James 5:13-16)

I’ve been praying about prayer lately. Perhaps it’s because I feel like I’ve fallen into a bit of rut. Perhaps it’s because some of my normal spiritual disciplines have become routine. Perhaps it’s because I find myself running out of words when I pray or simply repeating the same phrases over and over again. Perhaps it’s because the list of people I pray for is long and I don’t want to rush through their names. Whatever the reason, I’ve been asking the Lord to teach me how to pray on a deeper and more intimate level and He is answering my prayer. Here are just a few of the reflections I’ve written down over the last few days...

November 18 - “Prayer is colossal work. It is the nakedness of a soul intent before God - heart and mind and will, answering deep unto deep.” Prayer involves the whole person. Heart, mind, body, and will. It requires each of these facets of a person to intentionally direct themselves towards God. It’s a posture physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. This is the secret to true prayer. It is about orientation. I think of my Muslim friends who orient themselves towards Mecca or my Jewish friends who orient themselves towards Jerusalem. As a Christian, I orient myself towards no earthly city. No earthly place where a Temple once stood. No, I orient myself towards a Person. I fix my soul’s gaze on Christ. He is the fount of heaven from which I drink. He is the bread of heaven on which I feast. He is the joy of heaven which fills my heart. He is the strength of heaven which sustains my life. He is the wisdom of heaven which guides me through life’s challenges. He is the comfort of heaven in the midst of my griefs and losses. No matter where I am, He is there to greet me. No matter what condition I find myself in, He is there to receive me with open arms.

November 23 - Prayer is simply entering into Your presence each morning in the silence and quiet before the noise of the day gets too loud or the demands force me to pick my pace. To stand in that place before You with all the confused business of my life and this world spread out at Your feet. To try and see things as You see them. To try and see the people as You see them. To seek to understand the situations as You understand them. To have compassion. To open my heart to grace. And then to take up the burden once more onto my shoulders, full of confidence that I do not bear the burden alone, and go about my day not really having known what I should pray for but knowing that even as my words fail the Spirit prays for me with groanings too deep for words. This is what it means to pray.

November 25 - Prayer begins by slowing down long enough to truly see people. To listen long enough to truly hear people. To spend enough quality time so others feel valued and of worth. Prayer is attending to the hearts and souls of others. Hearing the words behind the words. Paying attention to body language and what’s being communicated subconsciously as well as consciously. Prayer is spending your day focused on others and then bringing them before Me in the quiet of your office at the end of the day. Keeping them in your mind’s eye with all their hopes and dreams, fears and failures, hurts and confusion, anger and frustration, joys and sorrows, loves and desires as you come into My

presence. Holding them out to Me as I speak blessing and grace and peace over them. I know their needs before you speak them. You do not have to give Me a list. You can simply speak their names and the names of their children and any particular burdens you know they carry before Me and trust Me to meet them right where they are. You can do this not only for the individuals and families you know but also for entire churches and communities and nations. You can hold up the Town of Parker before me. The State of Colorado. The United States. You can hold up before Me the people of Ethiopia and South Sudan and Uganda and Bangladesh and Dominican Republic and North/South Korea and Afghanistan and Bolivia and the many, many other nations you've been and where you have friends doing My work. I am with them in their suffering and heartbreak and I am at work bringing beauty from the brokenness just as I am doing with you.

November 26 - Doug, the challenge of prayer has very little to do with finding the time for it or the space or the quiet or the solitude. It has very little to do with the internal wrestling that ensues when you feel you aren't being heard or your prayers go seemingly unanswered. It has very little to do with the doubts that creep in when you try to make sense of prayer or evaluate it's effectiveness or square it with science. No, the real challenge for you is allowing yourself to be stripped naked before Me. To be strapped in the "prison house of your own life." To sit long enough for all the stuff you try to hide or stuff down deep inside to bubble to the surface. Prayer keeps you honest. Prayer keeps you real. Prayer reminds you that you cannot run from yourself nor from Me. You cannot hide from yourself nor from Me. You cannot ignore yourself nor can you ignore Me. We are linked - you and I - in an eternal relationship. We are locked - you and I - in an eternal dance. So hear my invitation to pray yet again this morning... "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." (Matt. 7:7) I am always here, waiting for you with open arms.

These are just a few of the thoughts that I've had recently and I believe they are leadings from the Holy Spirit. Ways He is answering as I seek to learn more about how to pray. You see, I want to be a man of prayer. I want to pray righteous prayers. Prayers that are powerful and effective for healing and forgiveness and reconciliation. Prayers for peace and wholeness and shalom. Prayers for my family, my church, my country, and my friends around the world. I want to pray bold prayers. God-sized prayers. Prayers of faith that will move mountains, drive out demons, and bring revival. I want to pray in such a way that the devil trembles and the kingdoms of this world shake. I want to pray such prayers not for my own sake but for the sake of the world God loves so much. Lord, teach me to pray!

Readings for tomorrow: None

November 29, 2021
The Watchman

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 32-34](#), [1 Peter 1-2](#)

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

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

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

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

I think about all I see happening in our world today. There is such a lack of compassion and empathy and love towards those who are different than us. The differences may be ethnic. The differences may be economic. The differences may be political. The differences may be social. No matter where the differences lie, we seem to have so little tolerance for one another. Our hearts are extremely hard. And if we let our hearts continue to harden, we will end up expressing only anger and hate both of which are poison to the soul. We must renew our commitment to one another. We must recover our calling to be our brother's and sister's keeper. We must embrace the command God has given us to be watchmen and watchwomen for our families, neighbors, friends, and communities, always speaking His truth in love.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 35-36, 1 Peter 3

November 30, 2021
Refugee Faith

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 35-36](#), [1 Peter 3](#)

It is good for my soul to spend time with refugees. Men and women from other countries who flee violence and persecution. Forced out of their homes for political, social, and religious reasons. They live as aliens and strangers in a new land. Sojourners and exiles in a foreign culture. No matter how long they may live in a place, they never truly adjust. A large part of their heart remains broken by the loss of their homeland. I remember talking with the Anglican Archbishop in Rwanda. His family was forced out of their home when he was very young due to tribal conflict. Through a miraculous series of events, he was able to make his way to America and get an education. He joined a large Christian non-profit and worked his way up to vice-presidential level of the organization. He was successful in every way one could imagine and yet, when the opportunity came to return, he immediately sold all he had and went home. Willingly re-entered poverty. Willingly gave up his comfortable and safe life here in the States to help his country recover from the violence of their recent past. I have another good friend who fled his country after being imprisoned for his faith. He was a teenager when the Communists put in him prison. He made his way across the border into a neighboring country to a refugee camp. He applied for refugee status and came to the US. He has been here for thirty years pastoring a church in Aurora, CO. But his heart longs for his home. He and I go back now to the region of the country where he was born and he is welcomed like a national hero. It's amazing.

In our readings from 1 Peter, Peter addresses his fellow Christians as "elect exiles" living in dispersion throughout the Roman Empire. He addresses them as aliens and sojourners in a foreign land. He calls them to live in radically faithful ways. Rejecting the ways of this world in order to live as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. They are a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9) They are in the world but they are not of the world. The nature of their exile is not easy. They face trials of various kinds. Harsh persecutions. Their faith is under constant assault. Their way of living is strange. The holiness of their conduct sets them continually apart. The core values of their life together - "unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind." (1 Peter 3:8) - make them easy targets. One would think this movement doomed to destruction. How in the world can they survive with no political access or power? No wealthy patronage to protect them? No military might at their disposal to keep them safe? They are scattered across the Roman Empire. They have no Temple. No earthly city to call home. They have no cultural center. Not even a common language. And yet they persevere. They hold fast to their faith. This ragtag group of exiles overcomes the world.

There is no more unlikely story in history than the church of Jesus Christ. And that history continues to be written. In 2019, Pastor Wang Yi of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, China was sentenced to nine years in prison for attempting to subvert the state. He had been arrested a year earlier with 100 of his parishioners. Like the Apostle Paul, he wrote a letter from jail which has been published in its entirety online. I commend it to you. However, here is an excerpt that I believe sums up what it means to embrace an "exilic identity" in this world...

"If I am imprisoned for a long or short period of time, if I can help reduce the authorities' fear of my faith and of my Savior, I am very joyfully willing to help them in this way. But I know that only when I renounce all the wickedness of this persecution against the church and use peaceful means to disobey, will I truly be able to help the souls of the authorities and law enforcement. I hope God uses me, by

means of first losing my personal freedom, to tell those who have deprived me of my personal freedom that there is an authority higher than their authority, and that there is a freedom they cannot restrain, a freedom that fills the church of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. Regardless of what crime the government charges me with, whatever filth they fling at me, as long as this charge is related to my faith, my writings, my comments, and my teachings, it is merely a lie and temptation of demons. I categorically deny it. I will serve my sentence, but I will not serve the law. I will be executed, but I will not plead guilty. Pray that the Lord would use me, that I might take the gospel to them. Moreover, I must point out that persecution against the Lord's church and against all Chinese people who believe in Jesus Christ is the most wicked and the most horrendous evil of Chinese society. This is not only a sin against Christians. It is also a sin against all non-Christians. For the government is brutally and ruthlessly threatening them and hindering them from coming to Jesus. There is no greater wickedness in the world than this. If this regime is one day overthrown by God, it will be for no other reason than God's righteous punishment and revenge for this evil. For on earth, there has only ever been a thousand-year church. There has never been a thousand-year government. There is only eternal faith. There is no eternal power. Those who lock me up will one day be locked up by angels. Those who interrogate me will finally be questioned and judged by Christ. When I think of this, the Lord fills me with a natural compassion and grief toward those who are attempting to and actively imprisoning me. Pray that the Lord would use me, that he would grant me patience and wisdom, that I might take the gospel to them. Separate me from my wife and children, ruin my reputation, destroy my life and my family — the authorities are capable of doing all of these things. However, no one in this world can force me to renounce my faith; no one can make me change my life; and no one can raise me from the dead." ~ Pastor Wang Yi

Friends, if you believe and receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, you are no longer your own. You have a new identity. A new citizenship in a Kingdom that never ends. Your life is hid with Christ on high. This world ceases to have any power over you. You are truly free to live and to love and to serve the lost, the least, even your enemies in the name of Christ. Set your mind and heart on things above and let your conduct be salt and light to those who walk in darkness.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 37-38, 1 Peter 4