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March 1, 2022
Humble Leadership

Readings for today: Numbers 10-13, Psalm 90

There seems to be a yearning in the human heart for deep connection. To God. To other human beings. There is a real craving in the world today for authenticity. A desire to “be real” and be known. I hear it all the time and I feel it down in my bones as well. The problem, of course, is most folks don’t really want to engage on an authentic level because it’s not very pretty when we do! We run into all kinds of sin and ugliness and we’re not very good at accepting each other’s faults. We aren’t very good at showing each other grace. We aren’t very good at forgiveness and reconciliation because such things take a lot of work. So we settle. We settle for less in our human relationships. We settle for not being known. Not being understood. Not being connected. And worst of all, we settle in our relationship with God. We only let Him in so far. We only let Him reign and rule over parts of our lives, not the whole. We only submit halfway and the result is a lot of pain and suffering and heartache.

Nothing’s new under the sun. The people of God have been struggling with these things for thousands of years. It’s like the struggle is hardwired into our system by the Fall. (Remember that tragic event in Genesis 3? It frames everything!) You think about the blessings Israel enjoyed. A literal pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day. God visibly present among them! God’s glory filling the Tabernacle. Moses literally speaking to God on their behalf. Silver trumpets blowing every time they went forth to remind them God would be with them. The parting of the Red Sea. The deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Rescue from the plagues. Manna in the wilderness. The miracles they experienced were incredible! And still they complained! Still they struggled to believe! Still they rebelled!

“And the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, and when the Lord heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp.” (Num. 11:1)

“Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, “Oh that we had meat to eat!” (Num. 11:4)

“Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. And they said, “Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” And the Lord heard it.” (Num. 12:1-2)

“And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.” (Num. 13:33)

Leading God’s people has never been easy. There is always complaining. Always whining. Always criticism. But guess what? That’s real! That’s authentic! That’s people being themselves. And if we’re honest, none of us are immune. Even Moses complains, “I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me.” (Num. 11:14) So what’s the answer? Humility. One of my favorite verses in all of Scripture is Numbers 12:3, “Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth.” What a statement! Moses’ leadership was not based on his power or eloquence or influence or wealth or talent. It was based primarily on his humility. His meekness. And because Moses considered others more important than himself, he wasn’t threatened. God put His Spirit on other leaders. He wasn’t threatened when God’s Spirit showed up in other parts of the camp.

Reminds me of the famous quote from Harry Truman, “It’s amazing what you can accomplish if you don’t care who gets the credit.”

Humility gives us the ability to accept other people for who they are...warts and all. It gives us the ability to extend grace even in difficult circumstances. It gives us the ability to address the log in our own eye first before we go to pluck the dust out of our brother or sister’s eyes. Most importantly, it is humility that allows us to submit our lives to the Lord and to follow in His ways.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 14-16, Psalm 95

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March 2, 2022
Power of Intercession

Readings for today: Numbers 14-16, Psalm 95

Today's passage reveals two things in stark terms. If God were not faithful. If His steadfast love did not endure forever. If His grace was not extended to generation after generation. We would all be dead. We would all be destroyed. Our sin is simply too much. Our penchant for rebellion too hard to resist. Our pride too much to overcome. At the same time, God has a mission. Come hell or high water, God will make His glory known on the earth. No obstacle will stand in His way. Not even His own people! No power will prevent Him from accomplishing His great task. Not sin. Not evil. Not death. "But truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord." (Numbers 14:21)

The people of God quake in fear at the report of the spies. They mutiny against Moses and the Lord. They make plans to head back to Egypt. Back to slavery. Back to what was familiar. It reminds me of one of my favorite Proverbs, "Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly." (26:11) But for the intervention of the Lord, they would have stoned Moses to death! Incredible! So God tells Moses to step aside so He can destroy them and start all over yet again. Once again, Moses is being tested. Once again, Moses is being challenged to stand in the gap for God's people. Once again, Moses intercedes. He calls on God to remember His own name. To be true to His character. It's an amazing prayer and worth reading again.

"But Moses said to the Lord, "Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for you brought up this people in your might from among them, and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O Lord, are in the midst of this people. For you, O Lord, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go before them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard your fame will say, 'It is because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give to them that he has killed them in the wilderness.' And now, please let the power of the Lord be great as you have promised, saying, 'The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation.' Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now." (Numbers 14:13-19)

Some might see this as Moses talking God down. Talking God off the ledge. Persuading Him to change His mind. This is where the true nature of intercessory prayer comes in. Intercessory prayer actually creates a new condition, a new situation to which God responds. Whereas the sin of the people of God created one situation to which God responds righteously in judgment; Moses' intercession creates a second situation to which God responds righteously in mercy. If Moses refused to intercede, God's people would have perished. God would have followed through on His threat and His punishment would be just. However, Moses did stand in the gap. He fell on His face before the Lord and asked God to forgive and pardon – not because the people of God deserve it – but for the sake of His own reputation and great name.

So often we are tempted to believe prayer is worthless. After all, God already knows what He will do, right? God already knows the outcome so why pray at all? Friends, this is part and parcel of what it means to be in a real, authentic relationship with God. He invites us to intercede. He invites us to lift up the needs of those we love. He invites us to stand in the gap for our friends and neighbors and community and world. And as we do, He promises to respond in accordance with His divine nature and

character and will. Does this mean we will always get the outcome we desire? No. Like any good Father, God keeps the bigger picture in mind. He sees what's happening on a universal, global scale and we have to trust He knows what is best. But this does not mean our prayers are any less powerful or effective. Let me encourage you to accept God's invitation to intercede on behalf of others. Don't be afraid to boldly ask God to act on their behalf. Call on God to intervene in accordance with His divine will and nature and then trust Him with the results.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 17-20

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March 3, 2022
Pointing People to Jesus

Readings for today: Numbers 17-20

As a pastor, I do a lot of counseling. One of the most common issues I face is something called “blame shifting.” Basically, a person commits a wrong and when confronted on it, “shifts” the blame to someone else. This can be their spouse. Their children. Their parents. Their boss. Even their pastor! :-)

I cannot tell you the number of times I have counseled a couple on their marriage only to have them blame me for their eventual separation and divorce. Never-mind the fact they were unwilling to put in the work. Unwilling to change any of their unhealthy behaviors. Unwilling to engage each other at a different level. At the end of the day, because the counseling didn’t “work”, it must be my failure as a pastor.

We see this same dynamic in play in Moses’ relationship with Israel. How many times do they accuse Moses of failing to lead them well? How many times do they blame him for not providing water, food, or getting them to the Promised Land? Never-mind their own sin. Their own lack of faith. Their own fear. Their worship of false gods. “And the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord! Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink." (Num. 20:3-5) Over and over again, we hear this refrain. Let’s go back to Egypt. Let’s go back to slavery. You brought us out here to die. The accusations are unjust. The attacks are personal. And Moses must have been hurt so he responds the way any of us would...he reacts in anger.

“Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock? And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock.” (Numbers 20:10-11) Makes perfect sense to me. I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve felt exactly the same way. It’s incredibly frustrating to be falsely accused. It’s hurtful to have your motives questioned or your character attacked. It makes me angry when people lie about me or say all manner of things about me that just are not true. How many times have I wanted to lash out over the years? How many times have I lashed out only to later regret it?

God will not be mocked. He will not allow us to get in the way of His own glory. By lashing out in anger and striking the rock twice, Moses was more focused on himself than on God. The people would now be tempted to be more afraid of Moses than of the Lord. So the Lord issues His judgment. “Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.” No one is above God’s law, not you. Not me. Not even Moses. All of us are responsible to “uphold God as holy” in the eyes of those we live with and live among. All of us are responsible to point people to Jesus no matter how hurt or betrayed or angry we may feel. And the only way we can ever do this with any kind of integrity is if we swallow our pride and humble ourselves before the Lord.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 21-24

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March 4, 2022
The Language God Speaks

Readings for today: Numbers 21-24

When I first became a Christian, I started eating at this little pit BBQ place off Arapahoe in Boulder, CO. It was owned and operated by an amazing man named Bruce. Bruce was the son of the famous “Daddy Bruce” who served the homeless of Denver for many years, making sure they got a full Thanksgiving dinner. Bruce Jr. was cut from the same cloth as his father. He not only served the homeless of Boulder, he also was a strong believer in Jesus Christ. I don’t know that I’ve ever met someone quite like him. He literally could quote you chapter and verse from the whole Bible. He would quiz me every time I came in before he would make me any food. He would tell the best stories about how God had worked in his life. One day, he was sharing with me his frustrations with how biblically illiterate American Christians tend to be. He was a black Baptist preacher and could preach with the best of them. I still remember the crescendo of his sermon that day. “Doug, when I’m in need don’t you give me no Footprints in the Sand! I don’t need no Prayer of Serenity! Tell me about the donkey that spoke! Now that’s in the Bible!” I still chuckle every time I think of it!

Today we read a crazy story about a fortune-teller named Balaam and his donkey. Israel is moving towards the Promised Land. God is going to fulfill His promise to Abraham. But it won’t be easy. The land is already occupied. There are forces arrayed against them all along the way. Nations and tribes and cities whom they will have to fight in order to claim God’s promise as their own. Arad. Amorites. Bashan. All fall before Israel. All are put to the sword. Devoted to destruction. And now it’s Moab’s turn. (If you remember, the Moabites are descendants from Lot who was Abraham’s nephew. His oldest daughter got him drunk and slept with him in order to get pregnant so these are distant cousins of Israel.) One can almost imagine living in those days. Getting word of a new superpower rising from slavery. Defeating the Egyptians. Overrunning all who oppose them. Fear and trembling seize the Moabites. So Balak, their king, sends for Balaam. His hope is that Balaam will use his magic to put a curse on Israel, thus weakening them so they can be defeated. But Balaam is visited by God. God commands Balaam not to go with the princes of Moab. However, Balaam eventually relents before the pressure Balak brings to bear. He mounts his donkey and begins his journey. It’s not long before the donkey freezes in its tracks. It can see the angel of the Lord blocking their path. Balaam, in his blindness, is both physically and spiritually unaware. God opens the mouth of the donkey (insert your favorite Shrek scene) and speaks to Balaam. The net result of it all is that Balaam will indeed go to Balak but will only speak blessings over Israel.

So what are we to make of such stories? Magic? Fortune-telling? Donkeys that speak? The point here is that God speaks to us in a language we can understand. He meets us in the middle of our cultural superstitions. He uses all things - even our delusions - to bring about His perfect will. Remember when Jacob peeled poplar and almond trees in order to breed a specific kind of goat and sheep in Genesis? Does anyone actually believe the power was in the trees? Or was it God using Jacob’s foolishness to accomplish His purposes? What about the bronze serpent on the pole? Is it really the talisman that saved Israel from the poisonous snakes that were killing them? Or was it God using their superstitions to deliver them? Think about the myths we so easily believe today. The “invisible hand” of Adam Smith from his famous book, *Wealth of Nations*. The myth of universal human rights in a world where every tribe and nation seems to place a different value on life. The notion that democracy is transcultural and can be universally applied in the same way we apply it here in America. (A mistake that cost us dearly in Afghanistan and Iraq...) The reality is we too believe in magic. We too believe in

myths. They may be couched in more sophisticated language and political or economic theory but they are fairy tales nonetheless.

So what's a Christian to do? We have to push past our superstitions and look to God. We have to push past the "bronze serpents" we create and stop looking to "fortune-tellers" to show us the way. We have to dig deep into God's Word. We must fix our eyes on Jesus! He is our only hope! He is greater than any bronze serpent! He is wiser than any Balaam! He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life!

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 25-28

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March 5, 2022
Succession Planning

Readings for today: Numbers 25-28

For years, I've harbored this dream of retiring as the church janitor. No big send off. No celebratory retirement dinner. No special recognition. Just a long, slow fade into the background. I hope with all my heart it happens and I'm actually making plans towards that end. Yes, I am still very much in my prime years of leadership. But time goes by fast and before you know it, I will come to the end. My preaching gifts will wane. My vision for the future will begin to fail. My influence will fade as it rightly should and when that happens, I must be humbly willing to take a step back. Let another take my place.

This is one of the things I love most about Moses. He knows he's coming to the end. The closer they get to the Promised Land, the closer they get to end of his life and leadership because God has already told him he will not be allowed to cross over. So when they arrive at Mt. Abarim, God calls Moses to go up and see the land He has given to Israel. It will be the last thing Moses will see before his death. He will at that time be "gathered to his people" just like his brother Aaron. However, Moses loves his people. He doesn't want them left without a leader so he asks God to appoint his successor. To raise up a man to take his place. And once again, God answers Moses' prayer. He raises up Joshua and he is commissioned as Moses' successor in front of all the people.

There are several things to learn from this passage about succession planning. First and foremost, none of us is irreplaceable. The Kingdom of God is much bigger than any one person. Second, we must humbly accept the fact that we will eventually decrease and another will increase. We will eventually fall and another rise to take our place. This is natural and good and right. Third, we should be preparing with this end in mind. Not holding too tightly to our position or power but rather plan for the day when we need to step aside. Fourth, we should be praying for God to raise up our successor. We should be praying for the man or woman whom God is calling to take our place.

As I said, I want to retire as the church janitor and I am already planning with that end in mind. Should the Lord be gracious to me, I might have another fifteen years in my current position. At that point, I need to relinquish my role as senior pastor and move into an associate role. I need to fade into the background and let another take my place. I need to humble myself under their leadership. Serve as their chief cheerleader. Do all I can to help them be successful. Then I need to fade even further. From ordained pastor to an ordinary staff position. Doing all I can to give my life in service to others. Decreasing as much as possible so others increase around me. Finally, after my physical and spiritual and emotional strength is spent, I can be "gathered to my people" and hear the words I long to hear from Jesus, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Readings for tomorrow: None

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March 7, 2022
God's Judgment

Readings for today: Numbers 29-32

Holy War. Jihad. Violence sanctioned by God Himself. In Numbers 31, God directs Moses and Israel to attack Midian. "Avenge the people of Israel on the Midianites. Afterward you shall be gathered to your people." Who was Midian and what had they done to Israel to cause God's judgment to fall on them in such an extreme fashion?

Midian was a son of Abraham and his servant Keturah. While Abraham was still living, he sent Midian away so that there would be no competition for Isaac's inheritance. Midian presumably thrived over the years becoming a great tribal nation. Abraham's great-grandson Joseph was sold to Midianite traders as they made their way to Egypt. Moses fled to Midian to escape Egyptian justice and actually married a Midianite woman. As Moses learned to lead the nation of Israel, he leaned on his father-in-law, a Midianite priest, for advice but Israel's close association with Midian would come back to haunt them as they began to intermarry with them and co-mingle their worship practices. This results in judgment as God pours out His wrath on Israel through a plague which is only stopped when Phinehas kills Cozbi, daughter of a Midianite chief named Zur, and her husband Zimri who was the son of a Simeonite chief. Furthermore, the Midianites had allied themselves with the Moabites, setting themselves in opposition to Israel, and called on one of their prophets - Balaam - to come and curse the people of God.

You may remember the 2nd Commandment. "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me," (Exodus 20:4-5) God is jealous for His divine name. Jealous for His divine glory. Jealous for His relationship with His people. He makes it clear over and over again throughout the Scriptures that He will tolerate no rivals. So when Israel begins to worship the Midianite gods, God takes action. First, he punishes Israel as I mentioned above. Then He calls for holy war. He commands His people to attack Midian and "execute the Lord's vengeance." Vengeance not in the sense of God losing control and lashing out but vengeance in the sense of the righteous execution of God's justice. Israel is successful. They kill all the males that come against them. They take the women and children hostage. They plunder their possessions. Then they go one step further. As an act of ritual purity, they kill all the male children and any women who is not a virgin. It is brutal. It is horrifying. It is judgment. The women were just as guilty as the Israelite men in the sin of idolatry at Peor and their guilt conveys to their male children as well who - if left alive - might seek their own revenge against Israel in the future. Once again, we have to remember how different ancient near east culture was when compared to our own. Blood feuds between tribes and clans were common and could last generations.

This is scary stuff. Especially for the 21st century American reader. It doesn't square with our notions of a loving God who always shows mercy and grace to the sinner. When we read passages like this, we think of modern-day terrorists. Suicide bombers. Religious extremists like ISIS and we cannot understand how our God could ever act in such ways. This is where we come face to face with God's holiness. God's righteousness. God's justice. The stark reality is this...evil makes God angry. Idolatry is an offense. He does not let it go. He does not overlook our sin. He does not turn a blind eye to our rebellion. This is why the cross itself is so brutal and horrifying. There God pours out the full measure of His righteous wrath and judgment on His Son. Satisfying the demands of divine justice through

Jesus' suffering and death. On the cross, the truly innocent One dies in our place thus saving us from God's righteous wrath and the "Lord's vengeance."

So what is our response? Repentance. Repentance is the only appropriate response of the creature when confronted by the Creator and this is the lesson we must all take away. God will not be mocked. Not back then. Not now. Not in the future. God is a God of love and mercy and grace but He is also a God of holiness and righteousness and justice. He is quick to forgive the sin of those who repent but He is also faithful to judge those who persist in their rebellion. Humble yourself before the Lord before it is too late. Embrace the Son and what He has done for you. Give your life to Christ that you might be saved from the coming judgment.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 33-36

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March 8, 2022
Death Penalty

Readings for today: Numbers 33-36

I worked for two years at New Jersey State Prison as a volunteer chaplain. NJSP is where the state of New Jersey sends the worst of the worst. Murderers. Violent criminals. Sex offenders. Gang leaders. Mafia dons. It is also where they used to house death row. I was never allowed into death row but I remember vividly standing outside the door and looking in through the window. It was a sterile environment and the men there were cut off from the general prison population. Most death row inmates are excluded from any kind of educational or employment programming and visitation is extremely limited. They can also spend up to 23 hours each day in their cells which essentially amounts to years of solitary confinement. New Jersey abolished the death penalty in 2007, five years after I left. But from 1690 to 1963, they executed 361 people.

The death penalty is a thorny subject for Christians. In theory, it does have biblical support drawn mainly from passages like the one we read today in Numbers 35. A careful reading of the passage reveals many fascinating details. Cities of refuge. Premeditated murder vs. accidental death. Avengers of blood. Congregational trials. Evidence. Witnesses. Motives. Methods. It's a very specific passage that actually places limits on vengeance in a way that would have been striking to other ancient near east cultures. It employs the principle of lex talionis or "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Proportional justice. It keeps generational vendettas from forming between families and clans and tribes.

Those who support the contemporary use of the death penalty on biblical grounds need to wrestle with the boundaries this passage sets. Provision must be made for the safety of the murderer while he/she awaits trial. Motive must be carefully discerned and the accuser is the one to carry out the sentence. If there is no premeditation then the congregation is allowed to judge and show mercy by assigning the person to a city of refuge for a certain duration. (Lifetime of the current high priest.) There must be more than one witness to the crime. And you cannot tolerate murder in the land lest it become ritually polluted.

Obviously, it's quite the challenge to apply ancient near east law codes in a 21st century context. Layer in the well-documented class issues we have in our legal system - statistically ethnic minorities and the poor are FAR more likely to be convicted and/or serve longer sentences - as well as the frequency with which our justice system convicts the wrong person (DNA evidence has been a game-changer here) and one can see why many would argue we should abolish the death penalty altogether. Furthermore, it seems Jesus accuses all of us being guilty of murder in His words from the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." (Matt. 5:21-22)

So what do we do? We must carefully and prayerfully consider our position on the death penalty. We must ask if it is just, not in abstraction but in concrete practice. We must make sure the actions we take are just, the process transparent, and if there is even a hint of incompetence or injustice in the way we prosecute then we must forbear. Furthermore, we have to come to grips with the gravity of our actions. Executing another human being is deeply significant. The shedding of blood is not something to take lightly. Unjust killing pollutes the land in which we dwell. Furthermore, to take the life of another

human being before they accept Christ as Lord and Savior consigns them to an eternity in hell. All these factors must weigh heavily on us as we wrestle with this issue and think about public policy in our society.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 1-3

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March 9, 2022
Testimony

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 1-3

Well done! You just finished Numbers and you've made it through what some would say is one of the toughest stretches in the Bible. Give yourself a high five! Now let's dig into Deuteronomy. The final book in what's known as the Torah.

The Book of Deuteronomy is a sermon. In fact, it is Moses' final sermon to God's people. His last will and testament. His final chance to encourage, challenge, confront, and comfort. He's led Israel for decades. He's led them out of Egypt. Led them through the wilderness. Led them through the ups and downs of the wilderness journey. He has personally witnessed the miracles of God. He has personally performed the miracles of God. Delivered the Ten Commandments. Issued the Law. Created an entire system of worship, governance, economics, and military organization that will long outlast him. It is a remarkable and almost unparalleled accomplishment.

Now he's at the end of his life. He's not going over the Jordan. He will not set foot in the Promised Land. He has one last chance to address the people he's led for over forty years. What would you say if you were in Moses' position? Given one last chance to address those you love or those you lead, what would be on your heart and mind? Moses points them to God. He points them to God's faithfulness. Points them to God's provision and protection. He wants them to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is with them and He is for them and He is going before them as they cross over into new territory under new leadership.

"The Lord your God who goes before you will himself fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your eyes, and in the wilderness, where you have seen how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you went until you came to this place." (Deuteronomy 1:30-31)

"For the Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He knows your going through this great wilderness. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you. You have lacked nothing." (Deuteronomy 2:7)

"This day I (the Lord) will begin to put the dread and fear of you on the peoples who are under the whole heaven, who shall hear the report of you and shall tremble and be in anguish because of you." (Deuteronomy 2:25)

"Your eyes have seen all that the Lord your God has done to these two kings. So will the Lord do to all the kingdoms into which you are crossing. You shall not fear them, for it is the Lord your God who fights for you." (Deuteronomy 3:21-22)

It's an amazing testimony and it gets me thinking...when I finish my life, how will I feel? When I look back at all I've experienced. All I've accomplished. All I set out to do. When I think about my family. My children. My future grandchildren. What will I want them to know about me? Say about me? Remember about me? Will it have anything to do with Christ? With all my heart, I hope so!

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 4-7

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March 10, 2022
The Greatest Prayer

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 4-7

Deuteronomy 6:4 contains the single most important prayer in all of Israel. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” It is the prayer known as the “Shema” (pronounced Sh’ma). Jews are required to recite this prayer twice a day. It is the first prayer they teach their children. It is the last prayer they pray before they die. It captures the essence of their monotheistic faith. Praying this prayer twice a day reminds the Jewish people of the personal relationship they have with God. They are His chosen people. They are His royal priesthood. They are His holy nation. Set apart by God Himself to declare His glory to the nations of the earth. “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations...” (Deuteronomy 7:6-9)

Because God has set His great love on them, the expectation is that Israel will love Him in return. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:5) This is the second part of the Shema. The commitment of the believer to honor God in every facet of their lives. First, we must love God with all our hearts. All our affections. All our feelings. We must love Him first above all other things. All other people. All of our accomplishments, dreams, and visions. Second, we must love Him with all our souls. From the depths of our beings. From the deepest recesses of who we are. To love God with our “soul” is to literally love Him from our bowels. From the gut. From a place deeper than our minds. Deeper than our hearts. The very core of our beings. Finally, we must love God with all our might. All our physical strength and activity should be dedicated to the glory of God. All our work. All our play. All our relationships. All our physical labor. All of it is to bring glory to God. This is what the Apostle Paul - a former Pharisee who prayed this prayer all his life - is referring to in Colossians 3:17 when he says, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

There’s a lot packed into today’s reading. So many reminders of God’s great faithfulness to His people. Despite their sin and grumbling and complaining, God remains steadfast. This is the essence of the covenant of grace God made with His people. Fast forward a few thousand years to Jesus. A lawyer challenges him one day to identify the greatest of the commandments. Jesus goes right back to the Shema. “And Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt. 22:37-40) Not only did Jesus place the Shema at the center of His life but He demands His followers do the same.

How are you seeking to love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength? What does that practically look like in your life? If you do not know or nothing readily comes to mind, let me challenge you to memorize Matthew 22:37 and ask God to give you the wisdom to know how to place the Shema at the center of your life just like Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 8-11

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March 11, 2022
Remember

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 8-11

It is so easy for us to forget God. I think about my own life. I've experienced the miraculous provision of God. From the moment He first saved me on the campus of the University of Colorado, I have blessed far beyond what I deserve. He introduced me to incredible, life-long friends through University Christian Fellowship. Introduced me to lifelong mentors who have shaped me into the man I am today. He introduced me to my wife of almost 26 years. He guided and directed my steps professionally at Boulder Community Hospital, Princeton Theological Seminary, New Jersey State Prison, Overlook Presbyterian Church, John Knox Presbytery, and now Parker Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Along the way, I've had a front row seat to the lives He has changed. It's truly incredible. Then I think about the conversations I've had with so many fellow believers down through the years. The miracles of healing they experienced through modern medicine. Miracles of provision as God opened new doors and new opportunities. Miracles of protection from bad decisions. Miracles of deliverance from sin and death. And still we forget. Still we lose sight of all God has done. Sadly, none of this is new.

Israel also had a tendency to forget God and Moses knew it. He knew they would get into the Promised Land and begin to prosper. They would build homes and plant vineyards. They would harvest crops and raise their herds. They would conquer cities and lay claim to the territory once promised to Abraham. And in the midst of all their success, they would lose sight of God. So he warns them. "Take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end. Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.'" (Deut. 8:11-17)

The reality is we have to work hard to remember. We have to incorporate spiritual rhythms into our daily lives so we do not forget. Reading God's Word and humbling ourselves before Him in prayer on a daily basis. Participating in corporate worship every week. Finding ways to serve. These are the holy habits that help us remember the most important truth of our lives...we are not our own! It is God who gives us the power to get wealth. (8:18) It is God who gives us victory over our enemies. (9:1-3) It is God alone who is righteous. God alone who is holy. To God belongs the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. And the only reason we are not destroyed along with the rest of the nations is because God made a decision in eternity to love us and set us apart for Himself. "Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day." (Deut. 10:15)

This is why we walk in the ways of the Lord. This is why we keep His commandments. By following the Law of God, we are constantly reminded of His great goodness towards us. Reminded of His great love for us. Reminded of His great faithfulness. God demands our obedience not because He needs it. Not because He's controlling or manipulative or demanding or insecure. God demands our obedience because He wants to preserve in our hearts our memory of Him. "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve

the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good.” (Deut. 10:12-13)

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 12-15

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March 12, 2022
God's Plan for Poverty

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 12-15

Poverty is a very real issue in our world today. Despite major advances in the global war on poverty - and the progress truly has been miraculous as over 1 billion people have been lifted out of extreme poverty since 1990 - the struggle remains. Furthermore, this issue is complicated by how we define "poverty." There are some objective measures defined by the World Bank and others. Extreme poverty is defined as living on less than \$1.90/day. Moderate poverty is less than \$3.10/day. But then there is this idea of "relative poverty" which measures the economic distance of an individual from a certain percentage of the median household income in a particular community. Our response to the problem of poverty will depend to some extent on which definition we are working from and this, in turn, will shape how we approach our interpretation of the Biblical text.

In my travels around the world, I have personally witnessed life-threatening poverty. I have seen what extreme poverty does to a person. Physical bodies wasting away from hunger. Lifeless eyes staring into the distance. Mothers begging me to take their newborn children. Men and women bombed out on khat lying in the streets. I have seen the effects of extreme drought and famine. I have seen what happens when crops fail or the rains don't come. I have seen the graves of those who've perished in the violence that often ensues when resources become scarce. And though I acknowledge the truth of Jesus' words, "you will always have the poor with you", it doesn't mean I have to like it.

Thankfully, God cares deeply for the poor. We see His tender love and care on display in our readings from today. Deuteronomy 14:28-29 contains part of the national tax code for the nation of Israel. Every year, the Israelites were expected to contribute a tithe (10%) to the Lord in sacrifices. This essentially provided income and food for the Levites since they had no property inheritance among the tribes of Israel. A second tithe was contributed to provide food and income for the Israelites themselves during those seasons when they celebrated the required feasts and were not able to work their land. In addition to these first two annual tithes, a third tithe was required every three years to provide for the poor, orphaned, widowed, foreigner, and Levites who lived in the community to make sure everyone was provided for and no one went hungry. "At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do." (Deut. 14:28-29) For those keeping score at home, this equates to an annual tax rate of 23% for each Israelite household and, in addition, they were expected to contribute freewill offerings as well.

What is the goal here? Believe it or not, it's to bring an end to poverty. "But there will be no poor among you; for the Lord will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess— if only you will strictly obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today." (Deuteronomy 15:4-5) If God's people will obey God's voice, contribute their tithes and offerings as commanded by the Law, and give generously to the foreigner, orphan and widow in their midst then the problem of "absolute poverty" disappears. However, this will be a continual process. A continual test the Lord will put before them according to Deuteronomy 15:11. "For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'"

Human society is unequal by definition. People are not all given the same gifts and talents. People are not all given the same opportunities. People are not given the same resources. Furthermore, there are forces beyond our control that make a huge impact on our economy. Natural disasters. Wars. Death. Disease. Famine. Drought. Availability of natural resources. All exact a toll. Throw in the fact that some human beings simply work harder and smarter than others and the gap between rich and poor only seems to grow.

God recognizes this very “human” trend which is why He demands generosity from His people. We who are blessed must in turn bless others. For our blessing did not come from ourselves but from God. He commands Israel to always remember their time as slaves in Egypt. To remain humble and compassionate towards those who have experienced economic hardship and therefore sold themselves into slavery to pay off their debts. When the Sabbatical Year comes (every seven years), they are to release their slaves, forgive their debts, and help them get started in their new life. “And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him.” (Deut. 15:13-14) The Sabbatical Year serves almost as an economic “reset” as the wealth of the nation - which God has provided - is redistributed in a way that closes the gap between rich and poor. This effectively addresses the “relative poverty” of the country and provides hope and opportunity for those who wouldn’t otherwise have it.

It’s an open question how often Israel actually kept the Sabbatical Year or what practical application it could have in today’s global economy. But the principle remains. If we live our lives with the understanding that all we have has been given to us by God. All our wealth. All our talent. All our opportunities. Then it becomes a lot easier to live generously. To provide for others. To sacrifice our own lifestyles so that we might relieve the burden of poverty for those around us, whether they live next door or on the other side of the globe.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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March 14, 2022
Don't Believe the Hype!

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 16-19

God intends His people to live as beacons of life in a culture of death. This requires us to be different. Set apart. Transformed. Counter-cultural. It requires us to have our minds and hearts shaped primarily by God's Word rather than the ways of this world. It forces us to think through what we consume on a daily basis from the media, social media, and other outlets. We have to ponder how much time we are truly spending meditating on the Word of God versus watching television or YouTube or scrolling through Facebook/Twitter/Instagram feeds.

Surprisingly, God's people have always faced this challenge. They have always been at risk of becoming just like the pagan nations around them. The temptation is to go with the flow of the culture rather than take a stand against it. It doesn't matter whether we are talking about Philistines, Amorites, Edomites, Greeks, Romans, Germans, Russians, Communists, Atheists, Republicans, or Democrats. The temptation remains the same. To exchange our allegiance to God for something more culturally acceptable.

This is why God commands the future kings of Israel to take out a pen and paper (or quill and scroll as it were) and literally write out for themselves every single word of the Law of God. "And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel." (Deut. 17:18-20) Their work will then be graded by the Levitical priests. Assuming the king passes, he will keep the Law with him day and night. He shall immerse himself in it. Meditating. Reading. Pondering. Praying. The goal here is not just rote memorization but something much deeper. To "learn to fear the Lord his God."

But why is it important to fear the Lord? Because it is the beginning of wisdom according to Scripture. And we cannot live without wisdom. Not well. The other thing this daily practice of reading God's Law will do is humble the king. It will keep him from believing he is somehow higher or better than his brothers and sisters. It will keep him from making the mistake so many of the pagan rulers made and so many of our own rulers make when they start to believe their own hype. They start reading their own press. They start to see themselves as gods, giving them the divine right to rule. We see this in our own time in places like North Korea, Russia, and China as leaders like Xi Jinping eliminate term limits. There is nothing that leads more quickly to tyranny than when a world leader starts to believe there is no authority higher than their own.

The same is true for each of us. As soon as we lose sight of the reign and rule of God over our lives. As soon as we stop reading God's Word and stop believing what it declares about us and our sinful condition before the Lord. As soon as we start believing the cultural lie that we are our own highest authority. That we know best. That we deserve whatever we can get out of this life. We are doomed. Our lives will descend into tragedy and suffering and pain. Our most important relationships will break under the strain. We will never find fulfillment or deep satisfaction because we will have lost sight of the greater purpose for which we were created. To love and to serve Almighty God. To live under His direction and command. To pursue holiness as we seek to honor God in all we say and do.

This passage really is a call to self-examination. A courageous self-inventory must be made. Where am I struggling to submit my life to the Lord? Where am I struggling to live under His authority? Do those I am in relationship with experience me as humble? Gracious? Self-sacrificing? When I look at my schedule, where is God? When I look at my spending habits, where is God? When I evaluate my life goals, where is God? Do these things reflect His Lordship? Have I brought them under His authority? Have I truly asked Him to shape the desires of my heart?

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 20-23

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March 15, 2022
Blessings and Curses

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 20-23

Buried in all the discussion today about who gets stoned for what and when is this key passage that the Apostle Paul will pick up later in Galatians and apply to Christ. “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.” (Deut. 21:22-23)

Blessings and curses are a huge theme in Deuteronomy. If you do well, you will be blessed. If you rebel against the commands of God, you are cursed. And not just you but your family, your land, your friends and neighbors because every action we take has communal consequences. This is why God is constantly telling His people to expel those who break His law lest they defile the land.

Enter the Apostle Paul. He picks up on this theme of “blessings and curses” in the Book of Galatians. He is writing to a group of largely Gentile believers who are doing their best to keep the Law of Moses. The entire book is a forceful critique that draws a sharp contrast between life under the Law and life under the Spirit. “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.” (Galatians 3:10-14) Basically, Paul argues that when we seek to justify ourselves by keeping the Law, we take on the curse because no one can actually achieve what the Law demands. Furthermore, he tags Abraham and reminds God’s people that it is not the Law that justifies in the first place but faith! Abraham believed God and was justified.

What then happens to the Law? What about the all the curses that have piled up over the centuries through the failure of God’s people to keep it? Christ literally becomes the curse for us! He literally takes our place and perfectly satisfies the Law’s just demands. And the sign of this great salvific event is the Cross. The place where Jesus literally hangs on a tree, becoming cursed on our behalf. As we know, He doesn’t hang there all night but is buried that same day in accordance with the instructions given in Deuteronomy so even in His death, He fulfills the Law.

This, in itself, is incredible news but Paul’s not done! Not only did Christ remove the curse by His saving death, He also unleashed all the blessings! All the promises God made to His people from Abraham forward are now ours in Christ Jesus! All the blessings of obedience are given to us because of Christ’s great faithfulness! This includes the very Spirit of God which is now our inheritance as adopted sons and daughters of God!

It is so easy to make the mistake of reading Deuteronomy and get crushed by the weight of expectations. We read about the blessings and curses and think immediately of our own lives and how often we fall short. We start to wonder and question our faith in God. We immediately recognize the gap that exists between who we are and who we should be. We look at the list and see all the things we should do that we don’t do and all the things we do that we shouldn’t do. An honest person knows they’ve sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. An honest person knows they have done things that bring them under the curse. Even earned them death. An honest person looks at the sin of their life and

experiences deep grief over what they have done. All that is good because it drives us to Christ! It brings us completely to the end of ourselves. The end of our pride. The end of our self-sufficiency. And it is there that Christ meets us with open arms. Hands and feet bearing the scars from where He hung on the tree. He embraces us. He lets us know all has been accomplished. The work of salvation has been finished. We are free.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 24-27

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March 16, 2022
First-Fruits

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 24-27

The principle of first-fruits is an important one in the Bible. Simply put, when we produce whatever it is we produce, we are to take the first portion. The best portion. And offer it to the Lord. Before we take care of ourselves. Before we meet our own needs. Before we pay the mortgage. Before we head to the grocery store. Before we pay the bills. Certainly before we take that vacation. Before even putting money into savings or paying off debt. We are to give unto the Lord first.

Why? Is God short of cash? Does God need our money? Isn't this just a way for churches to manipulate God's people? How do I make sure the money actually goes where God wants it? After all, I've seen celebrity pastors buy multi-million dollar homes. I've watched ministries spend all kinds of money on stuff that's not important rather than helping people. I've seen the abuse. I've seen the waste. Furthermore, I have all kinds of opinions on what my church should spend their money on. I don't agree with the way they do ministry or what they emphasize or how they operate. Why should I give them any money at all?

Those are great questions. And if we're honest, we've all probably asked them. But let's go a level deeper. Let's bring it closer to home. How are we spending our money? Are we actually any better than the church or organization we criticize? If we were to open our personal books and give ourselves an audit, what would we find? How much money did we waste last year? What extravagances did we indulge? How much did we spend on stuff that's not important rather than helping others? It's a sobering exercise, is it not? The reality is we are all corrupted by sin and our natural tendency is to hoard our wealth. To spend it primarily on ourselves. To make sure we improve our lifestyles. To make sure we get our needs taken care of. To make sure we get to live the lives we believe we deserve. And after we accomplish that then maybe we'll throw a little money God's way just to hedge our bets. We find ourselves in worship when the call for the offering comes so we take out our wallet and give God a \$20. Throw Him a bone. Keep Him happy. And we walk away feeling like we at least did something.

According to research, the average Christian gives 2.5% of their income away. (For comparison, during the Great Depression, the average was 3.3%.) Average giving by adults in Protestant churches across the United States is \$17/week. 37% of regular church attenders don't give at all. And the higher the income, the less likely a person is to tithe or give 10%. Only 1% of those making 75k or more tithe their income. That's the bad news. Here's the good news. About 10 million Christians give 10% or more totally \$50 billion dollars a year to churches and non-profits. 77% of those who tithe actually end up giving between 11-20% of their income away. And charitable giving has continued to grow in the US though the share going to religious organizations is decreasing.

So back to the principle of first-fruits...why is it important? It serves as a reminder that everything we have comes from the Lord. Israel was descended from a wandering Aramean named Abraham. A man of no consequence other than the fact God chose Him to become the father of a mighty nation. His descendants immigrated to Egypt where they grew into a large and prosperous people until the Egyptians felt threatened and enslaved them. For hundreds of years they suffered until they cried out to the Lord for deliverance. God brought them out from Egypt with miracles and signs and wonders. He fought on their behalf. He defeated Pharaoh and his army. He provided for them in the wilderness. Fed them with manna. Quenched their thirst with water from a rock. And now He would bring them into the Promised Land. A land flowing with milk and honey. A land full of natural resources where they would

flourish. None of this was their own doing. None of this happened through Israel's strength or ability or hard work. They are not masters of their fates or captains of their souls or in charge of their own destinies. They are God's people. His treasured possession. Among all the nations of the earth. So in recognition of this special status that they did not earn...they give. They offer the first and the best of what they have to the Lord.

So what about us? Do we do the same? Do we live our lives in recognition of all God has done for us? Do we offer Him the honor He deserves? Do we thank Him for where we were born? The family we were born into? The nation in which we get to live? The talents we are naturally endowed with? The opportunities He's given us along the way? The gifts we've received that we did not earn? And do we acknowledge His sovereign grace over our lives by offering back to Him our first-fruits of time, talent, and treasure? (Notice I didn't say time, talent or treasure because we cannot substitute one for the other.) This is truly what it means to love God with all our hearts and souls.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 28-30

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March 17, 2022
Simple Life

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 28-30

Obeys God and you will be blessed. Your family will flourish. You will never be defeated. Your crops will never fail. Your flocks will grow. You'll receive promotion after promotion at work. You're kids will earn college scholarships. You'll never see the inside of a hospital. You will be healthy and wealthy and prosper in all that you do. Disobey God and you will be cursed. Your family will suffer. Your enemies will be victorious. Your crops will fail. Your flocks will miscarry. You'll be terminated from your job. You're business will go under. Your kids will do drugs and never leave home much less go to college. You will be sick and poor and everything you do will turn to ash.

If only things were that simple...

Today's reading from Deuteronomy is one of the most misunderstood and even abused sections of Scripture. Heretical prosperity preachers love this part of the Bible. Especially Deuteronomy 28:12-14, "The Lord will open to you his good treasury, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands. And you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. And the Lord will make you the head and not the tail, and you shall only go up and not down, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, being careful to do them, and if you do not turn aside from any of the words that I command you today, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them." They love to tell their listeners that if they will just obey God by sending in their money - "sowing a seed" is the phrase they commonly use - God will make them the head not the tail. Their fortunes will only go up, never down. They will find healing for all their hurts. They will accumulate more possessions and earn more money than they know what to do with. All because they had faith and obeyed God.

If only things were that simple...

Sadly, life is not that simple. We all know it. We've all seen it. God's faithful often suffer. Their families struggle. The stock market crashes and takes their savings. Natural disasters strike and destroy all they own. I've seen cancer or COVID come out of nowhere and take the lives of some of the most godly people I've known. I've watched evil flourish. Look at what's happening in Ukraine right now! I've witnessed dishonest people get ahead. Horrible, manipulative, ungodly people flourish. The pandemic of the last two years has certainly brought the worst out in many folks and some of them seemed to have come out smelling like roses. I don't understand.

What does it mean to faithfully obey the voice of the Lord? (28:1) What does it mean to keep His commands and walk in His ways? (28:9) What does it mean to return to the Lord and obey His voice? (30:2) Here is what I've discovered. Following God's Law is a means to a much greater end! As always, the key is the heart. "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." (Deut. 30:6) The key is living from the "inside out" rather than from the "outside in." You and I cannot "work" our way into God's good graces. We can't "obey" our way into God's blessings. We can't "earn" our way into God's favor. That's "outside-in" thinking! The idea that if we just follow God's commands faithfully enough we will be blessed is nonsense. Life with God doesn't work that way! It's not an equation. It's not an A+B=C kind of deal. So we can't look at our life - with all it's ups

and downs - and conclude that when life is up, God and I are good. Or when life's down, God and I are on the outs. That's not how life with God works.

It's just not that simple...

What God is after is the human heart. Over and over again, He's makes this clear. Genesis. Job. Exodus. Leviticus. Numbers. Deuteronomy. The theme is consistent. God wants a family. A people with whom He will share His great love. Furthermore, He desires their love in return. Love Me with all your heart, soul, mind and strength! Return to Me with all your heart and soul! Love Me for who I AM! I AM the God who chose Abraham when he was bouncing around Ur living life as a happy pagan. I AM the God who visited your forefathers and mothers. Abraham and Sarah and Hagar. Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob and Leah and Rachel. I AM the God who delivered you from slavery in Egypt. I AM the God who guided and protected you in the wilderness. I AM the God who has brought you to the Promised Land. Yes, obey Me! Not because you have to or are forced to or because you are afraid of what might happen. Not because you'll get ahead in this world or be healthy and wealthy and live a life of luxury. No! Obey Me because you love Me and long to serve Me. This is the key! Loving God from the heart will NATURALLY lead to obedience which in turn NATURALLY leads to blessing. Don't get these confused. Don't put the cart before the horse. The goal here is not the blessings. The goal is God! God must be our supreme treasure. God must be our heart's truest and deepest desire. God must be our all in all.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 31-34

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March 18, 2022
The Song We Sing...

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 31-34

As we finish the Book of Deuteronomy, we need to pause for a moment and reflect on the life of Moses. Miraculously saved at birth. Raised in the palace of Pharaoh. Exiled for murder. Bedouin shepherd. Husband. Father. Called late in life to save Israel. Prophet. Miracle-worker. Deliverer. Spiritual and political leader of a nation of wandering ex-slaves. His life, especially the last third, was marked by his close relationship with God. Now we are at the end. Now the people stand on the borders of the Promised Land. Now he's on a mountain looking over at the fulfillment of all God has promised. Now is his last chance to share with his people all he has learned in his 120 years of walking with the Lord.

So Moses sings them a song...(Deut. 32:1-43)

"Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth. May my teaching drop as the rain, my speech distill as the dew, like gentle rain upon the tender grass, and like showers upon the herb. For I will proclaim the name of the Lord; ascribe greatness to our God! "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is He..." For Moses, everything begins with God. God's faithfulness. God's steadfast love. God's enduring grace. Without God, he is nothing. Without God, the people of Israel are nothing. Without God, they would still be slaves in Egypt. If God had abandoned them, they would have died in the wilderness. If Moses is going to sing about anything, it will be about the greatness of God! The glory of God! The majesty of God!

"They have dealt corruptly with him; they are no longer his children because they are blemished; they are a crooked and twisted generation. Do you thus repay the Lord, you foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you? Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you..." Moses also sings of the people he has served. He boldly reminds them of the truth. They are sinners. They are broken. They are rebellious. They despised God. They abandoned God. They doubted God. They disobeyed God. He sings, eyes wide open to the reality of their condition. He pulls no punches. He's not interested in sentimentality. This is his last chance to speak and he's not going to waste words on empty flattery.

"But the Lord 's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. "He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him, no foreign god was with him. He made him ride on the high places of the land, and he ate the produce of the field, and he suckled him with honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock. Curds from the herd, and milk from the flock, with fat of lambs, rams of Bashan and goats, with the very finest of the wheat— and you drank foaming wine made from the blood of the grape..." Back to God. It was God who first called Jacob. Found him in the wilderness. Loved him. Nursed him. Cared for him. Taught him how to walk. Taught him how to live. Guided him along the way. Always protecting. Always providing.

"But Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked; you grew fat, stout, and sleek; then he forsook God who made him and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation. They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods; with

abominations they provoked him to anger. They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth..." What was the response of the people? Again, rebellion. As they grew strong and prosperous, they forgot God. They started going their own way. Doing their own thing. Forgetting God. Seeking to be their own gods. They repeated the sin of Adam and Eve. They fell for the original temptation of the evil one. They gave in, wanting to live like gods themselves.

"The Lord saw it and spurned them, because of the provocation of his sons and his daughters. And he said, 'I will hide my face from them; I will see what their end will be, for they are a perverse generation, children in whom is no faithfulness...' So God judged them. Disciplined them in his wrath. He sought to purify and sanctify them through suffering. Through exile. Through wandering. Through defeat. He was faithful to remind them they held no power of their own. They had no strength of their own. All they had achieved had come via the mercies of God. He would not allow their illusions and self-deceptions to stand.

"For the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants, when he sees that their power is gone and there is none remaining, bond or free...See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand...Rejoice with him, O heavens; bow down to him, all gods, for he avenges the blood of his children and takes vengeance on his adversaries. He repays those who hate him and cleanses his people's land." It took God forty years to bring his people to their knees. But the long years of wandering were not in vain. Now they knew God. Now they saw God. Now they understood God. They submitted. They surrendered. They repented. And they were ready to enter the land He had promised.

Friends, this isn't just Moses' story. It's not just Israel's story. It's my story. It's your story. And this begs a really important question...when the years grow short and your strength begins to fail and you're surrounded by your family and those you love, what song will you sing? Will you sing of God and His great faithfulness? Will you sing of His mercies and kindness? Will you declare His glory and majesty? Will you make known His mighty works to the next generation? What song will you sing?

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 1-2, Psalm 105

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March 19, 2022
The Significance of Insignificance

Readings for today: Joshua 1-2, Psalm 105

God is no respecter of persons. God does not look on the outward appearance of a man or woman. He doesn't look to their credentials or their titles or their net worth. God doesn't need the influential or the powerful or those with a large platform. God measures a person solely by what He sees in the heart. Is the person humble? Teachable? Do they seek to serve rather than be served? Do they love unconditionally? Are they repentant? Do they cultivate self-awareness? Do they have a sensitivity to the Holy Spirit? These are the qualities God looks for in a disciple and we see them on display in the life of a Canaanite prostitute named Rahab.

Rahab is the most unlikely of heroes. She is "triple outcast" due to her ethnicity, gender, and vocation. She lives and works in a disreputable area of town. She is the antithesis of the Law and yet she responds in faithfulness to Yahweh. "I know the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the Lord your God, He is the God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath." (Joshua 2:9-11) As Jesus Himself will later say, "blessed is the one who does not see and yet believes." Rahab is blessed for her faith. Though she did not personally witness the miracles that took place at the Red Sea or in the wilderness, she exhibits a deep sensitivity to God which leads her to repentance. Repentance simply means to "turn around." To make a 180 degree shift in life and head in a new direction. Rahab exhibits this on a number of levels. She turns from her pagan, Canaanite faith to embrace Yahweh as Lord. She turns from her tribal and ethnic identity to become one with the people of Israel. She turns from her life of prostitution and marries Salmon, becoming the great-great grandmother of King David. (Matthew 1:5)

Rahab's story is one of the most remarkable stories of redemption in all of Scripture. Without Rahab, the conquest of the Promised Land might have failed before it even started. Without Rahab, the people of Israel may have gotten bogged down in a pitched battle at Jericho. Without Rahab, the casualties would have been high, morale would have been lost, and the people might have gone back to Egypt. Her faith saved not only herself and her family but the people of God as well.

One of the great temptations we face is to assume we are too insignificant to be used by God. We look around at those who are more powerful, more influential, more popular and we wonder how in the world we can compete. We look at those who are more wealthy, more financially secure, who seem to have more disposable income and we wonder what difference we can make with our meager resources. We look at those who are younger and more attractive, more physically fit, more healthy and we wonder how we can keep up. We look at those who are smarter, have more degrees, who've achieved more success and we wonder why God would ever want to use us. Rahab's story exposes the lies we so often believe. Her testimony proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that God can and will use anyone who comes to Him by faith. Repent, friends! Turn and believe. Let God use you to further His great plan of salvation in the world!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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March 21, 2022

Altars

Readings for today: Joshua 3-6

“And Joshua said to them, "Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever." (Josh. 4:5-7)

When you think back on your life, where have you seen God at work? Where have you seen His finger touch down? Where have you witnessed Him working a miracle on your behalf? How do you remember such things? How do you mark such occasions? Israel built altars. They would take uncut stones and stack them on top of each other to remind themselves of God’s great faithfulness. As we get deeper into the Old Testament, it will soon feel like the landscape is riddled with these altars. It’s like you can’t travel anywhere in Israel without stumbling over an altar they’ve made! Altars were significant. Especially in an oral culture where many of the stories were not being written down as they happened but instead were passed from father to son, mother to daughter. Walking by an altar presented an opportunity for the family to pause and remember and re-tell the tale of God’s great love and miraculous deliverance for His people. These altars formed something like a national “scrapbook” or “Instagram” account for ancient Israel. A place they could go to be reminded of their most precious memories.

Of course, preserving the institutional memory of Israel was not the only purpose for the altars. There was an “evangelistic” component as well. “And he said to the people of Israel, "When your children ask their fathers in times to come, 'What do these stones mean?' then you shall let your children know, 'Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.' For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, that you may fear the Lord your God forever." (Josh. 4:21-24) Remember, God’s great aim is to fill the earth with His glory. His great vision at the end of time is that of every tribe, tongue, and nation coming to bow before His throne. Even here, Israel is being reminded of her calling to be a light to the nations. To reflect to the world the greatness and glory and majesty of God. Sometimes that will mean executing divine justice on the pagan tribes around them. Other times it will mean showing great mercy happened with Rahab and her family in Jericho. Through it all, God is making Himself known to the world in and through His people.

The same holds true today. God is making Himself known to the world through His people. His plan hasn’t changed. His purposes haven’t changed. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever! Where His people struggle, God brings comfort. Where His people fail, God brings discipline and judgment. Where His people step out in faith, God meets them and performs miracles on their behalf. This is who our God is and always will be!

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 7-10

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March 22, 2022
Collective Guilt

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

Today's reading is a tough one. Ancient Near East justice was often brutal and terrifying and impacted more than just the individual who committed the crime. Achan broke faith with God. He took items dedicated to the Lord and hid them in his tent for personal gain. This was not just stealing, it was sacrilege. Taking what is holy and desecrating it. Notice the play on words in this passage. Devoting the spoils of war to destruction typically meant burning them in a great bonfire as an offering to the Lord. However, Achan kept some of the devoted things for himself therefore the anger of the Lord "burned" against the people of Israel. Furthermore, once the sin was discovered, they took Achan and his family and all his possessions and "burned them with fire" in the valley of Achor. We cannot fathom how such an act could ever be called just and good much less be commanded by the Lord but again, God speaks to us in cultural language we can understand and He works through our common cultural understandings to reveal His will.

This raises another difficult question for us. The idea of collective guilt. Achan sins by taking some of the devoted things but the Lord's anger burns against the people of Israel. Thirty-six men die in the ensuing attack on Ai as God withdraws His protective hand in judgment. Many more are probably wounded in the assault as well. So much grief. So much pain. So much suffering. All because of one man's sin. And God makes it very clear He holds Israel responsible for what Achan has done. "Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I commanded them; they have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen and lied and put them among their own belongings. Therefore the people of Israel cannot stand before their enemies. They turn their backs before their enemies, because they have become devoted to destruction." (Joshua 7:11-12) Why did God not just kill off Achan? Why did He punish all of Israel for one individual's transgression? How in the world can this be fair?

Once again, we are confronted with cultural distance. We have been raised in a modern, western context which elevates the individual above the community. We think of ourselves as independent agents first and members of a community second. When a person sins or commits a crime, they do the time. They pay the price. They suffer the consequences. Not their family. Not their community. Not the people they are connected to unless they were active accomplices. The Ancient Near East was a much different world. The people of Israel held a collective identity. They understood themselves to be members of a community first and individuals second. They saw themselves as intrinsically connected to each other so when one person sinned, all were culpable. All had a share in the guilt. All were accomplices in allowing such a thing to take place. By the way, this idea is replete throughout the Scriptures and it is one of the major reasons we struggle to bridge the gap between the world of the Bible and our world today.

Friends, the reality is we are not just individuals with a personal relationship with God. We are members of a body called the church that holds a collective identity before the Lord. What we say or do impacts those around us. Our individual sin creates a ripple effect in the community that does have consequences. We are our brother and sister's keeper. We are responsible one for another. We are held accountable by God on some level for the way we contribute to the overall health and well-being of those around us whether it is in our families, among our friends, in our neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and communities. Our actions or lack of actions matter to God and they make a significant difference in the world. Thankfully, God doesn't just judge us collectively. He redeems us collectively

as well. 1 John 2:2 says, “Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” Thanks be to God for collective grace!

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 11-14

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March 23, 2022
Keeping Perspective

Readings for today: Joshua 11-14

It's about this time every year in my Bible reading that I start to get weary. Worn down by all the bloodshed and violence. Worn down by all the God-sanctioned religious warfare. Worn down by the thoughts of men, women, and children dying in these cities as Israel conquers the Promised Land. I am worn down by a world I do not understand. Worn down by the brutality of it all. Worn down trying to understand how God is driving it all. I come to the end of my finite mind. I come to the end of my understanding. I come to the end of my ability to reason my way through. And I just sit with the horror of it all. Overwhelmed.

Several years ago, I had dinner with some friends. One of them does a lot of work in Rwanda with the mountain gorillas. He and his family have been engaged over there for decades helping with the research. He was there just after the genocide. He saw the bodies piled up in the streets. Stacks upon stacks. It was horrifying. He can never get the images out of his head. I have another friend who survived the Killing Fields of Cambodia. He remembers the mass graves. Miraculously escaped one himself. He remembers standing in a line as soldiers executed one person after the next and when it came his turn, they pulled him out of line for some reason and kept on killing. If there's anything history has taught us, it's that humanity's inhumanity knows no bounds. The purges in Maoist China and Stalinist Russia. The Holocaust. The recent invasion of Ukraine. Those are just the more recent examples! Think of the Mongolian conquest. The Crusades. The African slave trade. British occupation of India. Rome's brutal conquest of the Germanic tribes. For as long as human beings have walked this earth, there has been war. There has been violence. There has been suffering. In fact, some historians calculate that in the history of the entire human race, we've experienced four years of peace. FOUR! Can you imagine?

When human beings engage in such violence, they tend to pull on a common thread...God. God ordains this war. God sanctions this violence. God is on our side. God commands us to fight these battles and destroy these enemies. But is this really true? I readily admit I struggle through the histories of the Old Testament even more than I do Leviticus. In my head, I can make some sense of the law code but I cannot rationalize all the death and destruction. So what's a faithful, Bible-believing Christian to do?

Three things help get me through this part of the reading every single year...

Joshua 5:13-15. At the beginning of the conquest, before the fall of Jericho, the commander of the Lord's armies appears to Joshua. Joshua falls on his face before him and asks him if He is for Israel or for their adversaries. It's a great question. It's a common question. Essentially, he's asking the angel, "Are you for us or against us?" Are you on our side or their side? Are you team Israel or team Canaanite? I love the angel's response. "No, I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come." Basically, the only "side" I'm on is my own! I am no tribal deity. I am not like the other gods. I reign and rule according to my own sovereign purposes and plan.

My finite mind. My understanding of the world is shaped by time, culture, space, nation, etc. I am not an "objective" observer of history. There is no such thing. I have built-in biases and assumptions that I bring to the table when I read the Word of God that act as "filters." These filters can be helpful or harmful depending on the text and will shape how I "receive" the Word of God in any situation.

Humility. I need to read with humility because I do not know all the answers. Nor will I ever. My questions and fears and doubts are real and I may not find satisfaction this side of heaven. That's okay. If there is a God who rules and reigns over the universe and if this God is good then I can ultimately trust Him. I can trust He sees things I cannot and He is orchestrating things to His own ends which are ultimately holy and righteous and just.

There is one more thing I always try to keep in mind. My own sinfulness. The evil I carry in my own heart. Like the Apostle Paul, I do things I know I should not do. I don't do things I know I should do. Every day is full of the sins of "commission" and the sins of "omission" that negatively impact the lives of those I love and the lives of those I am around. The evil in the world is not just "out there" but inside of me as well. So I read with the understanding that but for the grace of God, I too deserve death and destruction. And that moves my heart to praise and thanksgiving for what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 15-18

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March 24, 2022
Finishing Strong

Readings for today: Joshua 15-18

The key is not how we start the race but how we finish. I remember running in my first 5K when I was a young boy with my brothers. It was the Denver Symphony Run in downtown Denver. I remember the day was dreary and rainy. I remember pushing my way to the front of the start line with my brothers. I remember the starting gun going off and the three of us sprinting to the front of the pack. We led the race for about the first 50 yards. You probably can imagine what happened next. We spent the next three miles alternating between jogging and walking as we struggled to finish. It was a painful experience.

Israel sprints out of the gates in their conquest of the Promised Land. They win victory after victory. Joshua's leadership is exceptional. His tactics strong. His strategic decisions brilliant. Always in the right place at the right time. Anticipating. Attacking and counter-attacking. It reminds me of the movie, *When We Were Soldiers*, and how Colonel Hal Moore seemed to make every right move. The first campaign has come to an end. Israel is now firmly and deeply entrenched. They are the new power to be reckoned with in the region. But Joshua cannot be everywhere all at once so it is now up to each tribe to go out and secure their inheritance. They are to go out with the same faith and boldness and courage that marked Moses and Joshua and complete the conquest. They are to place their trust in God and His ability to fight on their behalf. But they fail. They fall short. They lose heart. So the Jebusites remain in the territory of Judah. The Gezerites remain in the territory of Ephraim. Other Canaanites remain in the territory of Manasseh. As they struggle to uproot those already living in the land, they start to lose heart. They give into fear. They are afraid of the military might of those who oppose them. The iron chariots and those fortified in the hill country. They worry they won't succeed. They take their eyes off of Yahweh. They forget His faithfulness. And the conquest is never fully completed.

Finishing is hard. How many people do you know who start this race we call the Christian life only to wither along the way? Jesus knew this about us and He even told a story once about a farmer who went out to plant his seeds. Some seeds fell on the hard path. Some seeds fell among the rocks. Some seeds fell among the weeds. Other seeds in good soil. Each tried to take root. The seeds on the path had nowhere to go so they were eaten by the birds. The seeds among the rocks had no place to put down roots so they sprung up quickly but then died. The seeds that fell among the weeds also sprung up but were eventually choked off. Finally, the seed that fell on good soil produced a bountiful harvest. What makes up the soil of your heart? Did the seeds of the gospel ever find purchase in your heart? Did they spring up only to die for lack of roots? Did the cares and the worries of this world choke off your faith? Or are you producing a harvest of righteousness? Are you finishing the race strong?

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 19-22

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March 25, 2022

Witness

Readings for today: Joshua 19-22

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 23-24, Judges 1

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March 26, 2022
Choose this Day...

Readings for today: Joshua 23-24, Judges 1

My grandfather was my spiritual hero. A man who loved and served Jesus for over ninety years. He started preaching at 14. He didn't stop until he was in his late eighties. After retiring from full-time ministry and moving into a retirement community, he worked part-time at a local church and did all the visitation and pastoral care for the graduated care facility. I remember sitting with him in his living room and reading the Bible together after I became a Christian. He had read through the Bible who knows how many times over the years. It was my first time through. In the middle of our time together, he paused and said, "hmmm...never seen that before." I said, "What do you mean? Haven't you read through the Bible like a million times, granddad?" "Yes", he replied, "But there's always more to discover." When I graduated from seminary, granddad was dying. He had a few months left to live. He was living in a room with grandma who was catatonic from Alzheimer's and was suffering from some paralyzation due to a burst cyst in his ear. My mom warned me he probably wouldn't be able to talk. I walked into the room and for the next TWO HOURS he proceeded to talk my ear off about life and ministry and my future as a pastor. He was so proud. So excited. It was like he had been saving up all his words just for me. He "went the way of all the earth" just two months later. He and grandma died within two weeks of each other. It was the first funeral I performed as a pastor.

One generation rises. Another falls. But the promises of God remain the same. "Therefore, be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left...Be very careful, therefore, to love the Lord your God...And you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one word has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one of them has failed." (Josh. 23:6, 11, 14) Think of all the things Joshua had seen! Slavery in Egypt. The plagues. The parting of the Red Sea. God meeting with His people on Sinai. The Ten Commandments. Manna from heaven. Wilderness wandering. Water from rocks. The parting of the Jordan. The incredible victories against Jericho and Ai. The beginning of the conquest of the Promised Land. What a life! And through it all, what marked Joshua was an unwavering commitment to serve the Lord. To love the Lord with all his heart and soul and mind and strength. Joshua was a worthy successor to Moses and led God's people well. And now at the end of his life, he challenges the people to carry on! To continue to trust God! To walk in faith and see the fulfillment of all God had promised!

"Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Josh. 24:14-15) Choose this day whom you will serve. The question reverberates throughout history. Every generation is called upon to answer. Will we love and fear and serve the Lord? Or will we bow down to the gods of our own making? The gods of our culture? The gods we once served before coming to faith? As for me and my house...we will serve the Lord!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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March 28, 2022
The Power of One

Readings for today: Judges 2-5

All it takes is one. That's the message I send every time I consult with a struggling church. One leader. One person of influence who is willing to seek the Lord. Willing to humble themselves before Him. Willing to walk in the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of all wisdom and strength. So many churches are struggling in America right now. According to some statistics, 80-85% of churches in the evangelical space are plateaued or declining. The numbers are worse in the mainline denominational world. It's heartbreaking. Church consultants have discerned any number of reasons. Confusion over mission. Disconnection from the local community. Unresolved conflict. Spiritual abuse and neglect. Sin in the camp. Dysfunctional leadership. The list goes on. Where to find hope?

The Book of Judges is one of the most depressing in all of Scripture. Israel suffers tremendously under the weight of sin and disobedience. God simply gives them over to the desires of their hearts and the results are devastating. However, renewal is always just one godly leader away. All it takes is one man or one woman who seeks God with all their heart. One man or one woman who has the courage to take a stand for their faith in the face of incredible odds. One man or one woman who is willing to endure hardship for the sake of a cause greater than themselves. God raises up such men and women. Makes them judges for His people. Spiritual leaders who become "saviors" of a sort. The result is repentance. Freedom. Deliverance for God's people.

I see the same dynamic in play in our day and age. It's the hope I offer every church I work with. All it takes is one leader who is willing to seek the Lord with all their heart. One leader who has the courage to stand for their faith and remain healthy and differentiated in the face of incredible odds. One leader who is willing to endure all sorts of hardship and pain for the sake of congregational renewal. Most of the time it is the pastor but it could just as easily be a key elder, key deacon, key lay leader. All congregations are emotional systems. As such, they are intimately and intrinsically connected. When one leader within the system makes the decision to pursue greater levels of emotional and spiritual health, the system is forced to respond. At first there is always pushback as the system reacts by trying to turn the leader back. All systems tend to resist healthy change. But if the leader remains courageous and perseveres, the system will eventually adjust and become more healthy itself. Ideally, of course, it's not just one leader who makes this decision but a group of leaders. Men and women who can support and encourage each other along the way.

Perhaps you belong to a struggling church. Perhaps it's your business or family that's struggling. All of us belong to emotional systems. The good news is God can use anyone to bring about spiritual and emotional renewal. All we have to do is turn to Him. All we have to do is humble ourselves before Him. All we have to do is walk in the fear of the Lord to receive wisdom and strength for the journey.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 6-9

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March 29, 2022
The Work of Renewal

Readings for today: Judges 6-9

Renewal never comes easy. Not in my experience. Renewal in a marriage. Renewal in a family. Renewal in a congregation. Renewal in a community. It comes through hardship and suffering and a lot of pain. There is conflict to manage. Egos to assuage. Obstacles to overcome. Perhaps the biggest challenge is not external but internal. Our insecurities. Our lack of confidence. Our aversion to risk.

Gideon is the least likely of heroes. He's an insignificant son of the weakest clan in the tribe of Manasseh. He's just an ordinary guy trying to do his best to make his way in a very tough world. When the angel of the Lord first approaches him, he's threshing grain in a winepress and attempting to hide from the Midianites. When the angel addresses Gideon as a "mighty man of valor", Gideon responds by telling him he's got the wrong guy. He's showed up at the wrong house. He's in the wrong part of town. When the angel further tells Gideon he will deliver Israel, Gideon needs multiple confirmations involving a fleece before he will agree. Once the decision is made, Gideon assembles an overwhelming force of men to go with him. God strips his force down to 300. This makes Gideon fearful and anxious. Nothing about this process is easy. Nothing about it is guaranteed. God is taking Gideon beyond himself, forcing him into a place of utter dependence so he will learn to trust in God and not himself.

I see this happen all the time in the marriages, families, churches, and communities I work with. Husbands and wives come into my office at the end of their rope. They've done all they can to manage the conflict in their relationship but things have only gotten worse not better. They can't hear each other. They can't see each other. They can't understand each other. They want to call it quits. Meeting with me is often their last resort. Parents and children come into my office at each other's throats. So much anger. So much hurt. Every conversation seems to devolve into an argument. Voices are raised. Painful things are said. They wound each other deeply. They see no way out. Pastors and other church leaders email or call. They are confused. Frustrated. Hurt. Depressed. Exhausted. They've tried so hard to love their church. Tried so hard to serve their church. Tried so hard to lead their church. What have they received in return? Their motives are questioned. Their character is impugned. Their reputation is trashed. People do all they can to subvert and sabotage even their best efforts.

The work of renewal is not for the faint of heart. It requires courage to face down the forces that oppose God's work. To turn away anger with gentleness. To meet sin with grace. To be a peacemaker in the face of conflict. To persevere under the unrelenting pressure. But God can strengthen the weary heart. God can mend the broken heart. God can give courage to the faint of heart. God specializes in bringing hope in the most hopeless of situations.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 10-13

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March 30, 2022
Jephthah's Vow

Readings for today: Judges 10-13

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

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

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

What about us? We claim to worship the supreme God of the universe. We claim to know the King of kings and Lord of lords. We claim to be heirs of His eternal Kingdom. But do our lives reflect this truth? How much have we accommodated to the ways of this world? Brought God down to our level? Limited Him to our tribe? Reduced Him to our personal deity?

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 14-18

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March 31, 2022 Flawed Heroes

Readings for today: [Judges 14-18](#)

I grew up in church. Sunday school every weekend. Learning the Bible stories via flannel board. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Noah on his ark. Moses parting the Red Sea. Joshua and the battle of Jericho. One of my favorites was Samson. For a young boy, what's not to like? Strength. Power. One man winning victory after victory culminating in a final heroic act of self-sacrifice where Samson literally brings the roof down on his enemies!

As I got older, I began to learn about all the stuff my Sunday school teachers left out. Rightfully, by the way, as I was too young to understand. Adam and Eve's rebellion and descent into sin. Noah and his family being saved but at incredible cost. Moses parting the Red Sea but often ending up in these violent clashes that would end in entire families being wiped out. Joshua devoting entire cities to destruction. And Samson. A moral train wreck of a man. Selfish. Immature. A man who seems to use his God-given gifts for his own gain and self-gratification. What are we to make of such heroes? The Bible seems full of them. Broken, frail, sinful men and women who are subsequently enshrined in the great "Hall of Fame" of faith in Hebrews 11?

First and foremost, we are to see them as they are...not as we wish they would be. They are human beings. As such, they are sinners just like us. People whom God chooses to use despite their shortcomings and failings. By the way, this is one of the best arguments for the trustworthiness of Scripture. It paints an honest picture of God's chosen people. Putting their weaknesses on display right alongside their strengths. Compare that to the sacred writings of other major world religions where heroes are whitewashed to perfection.

Second, we are to look beyond them to the true source of their strength. The true source of their wisdom. The true source of all their miracles and great victories. It is the Spirit of the Lord that rushes on Samson and gives him the ability to tear a lion apart. Kill a bunch of Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. Trap and tie torches to hundreds of foxes. Tear off a city gate. Bring an entire building down around him. This is not Samson's doing. It has very little to do with the length of his hair. That's superstitious nonsense! Not cutting his hair was simply an outward sign of the Nazirite Vow his parents had taken on his behalf before he was even conceived. (Judges 13:2-5) Keeping the vow was a sign of his devotion and dedication to the Lord, the true source of his strength. When he treated his vow casually by allowing his wife to manipulate him, his strength left him. Again, not because of his hair but because he had despised the Lord.

Finally, the entire book of Judges is meant to lead us to despair. Each judge over Israel seems less and less capable of leading well. They are increasingly morally compromised. Increasingly they lose sight of the One True God. Increasingly they abandon the ways of the Lord and follow their own paths. In fact, the city of Dan - a major city in the Northern Kingdom of Israel - will continue to be a city known for its idolatry. Jeroboam will put one of his golden calves here in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. So what begins with violence and idolatry by the tribe of Dan will continue until the day God sends the Assyrians to wipe out the northern kingdom altogether.

Why drive us to such despair? To teach us yet again of our need for God. Over and over again, the same narrative is reinforced. Humanity is hopeless. From Adam and Eve to the Great Flood. From Noah to the Tower of Babel. From Abraham to slavery in Egypt. From Moses to the end of Judges.

With each generation, man's inhumanity to man only grows. Only increases. Only becomes more pervasive. And we would be lost except for God. He continues to pursue us. He continues to reach out to us. He continues to be faithful even in the face of our unfaithfulness. The climax of the Biblical story is, of course, something we celebrate on Holy Week. Jesus' suffering and death and resurrection is God's ultimate and final victory over humanity's sin and the curse of death.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 19-21

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