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May 2, 2022
The Deep Work of the Spirit

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 17, Psalms 1-2, 33, 127, 132

One of the things you notice when you read the Bible year after year is that some of the same issues tend to pop up. The Holy Spirit uses His Word to reveal deep character flaws that must be addressed. For example, every time I read Psalm 127, I am reminded of one of my greatest struggles which is my desire to be successful. To make my life count. To do something significant. To strive to be the best. These values were ingrained in me from an early age. They are not necessarily bad in and of themselves. The problem is I too often let these good things become ultimate things in my life. I start to pursue success at the expense of my relationship with God or those I love. I focus on the future rather than finding contentment in the present. I covet what I don't have rather than be thankful for what I do have.

Several years ago, the Lord spoke to me during a time of prayer. It wasn't an audible voice or a lightning bolt from heaven or anything like that. It was simply an impression in my heart. A feeling in my gut. A few random thoughts in my head that suddenly coalesced into a message I needed to hear. It was a short message. Three simple words. Obscurity. Anonymity. Insignificance. I was journaling and these three words started ringing over and over again in my head. Obscurity. Anonymity. Insignificance. Over the years I've learned to pay attention to these kinds of things in my prayer time so I sat back from my keyboard and asked the Lord to give me further insight into what He was saying. God said, "I want you to labor in obscurity. Embrace anonymity. Pursue insignificance." To be honest, my first thought was "No way!" However, after pondering the message for a few days, I realized what God was doing. The Holy Spirit was about to do some deep work in my heart. Work that would turn me around and inside out and upside down. It was life-changing work that would shift my perspective eternally.

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

Unless God builds the house. Unless God builds David's house. Unless God builds our house. We all labor in vain. This was essentially the message God was sending me during my devotional time. I was spending so much energy working so hard to be successful. To stand out among my peers. To be faithful to God. And all the while God was calling me to rest. To trust. To stand back and let Him do the

“building” of my life. Let Him guide and direct my path. Let Him have the glory for the success I was seeking to achieve.

I’ve learned a lot over the years about the meaning of those three, God-given words. They no longer feel unnatural. No longer feel like they’re cutting against the grain of my life. In fact, I not only have learned to accept them but to embrace them as a way of life for myself.

Obscurity - I love where I am. I love the church family I get to serve. I love the team of leaders I get to serve alongside. We are gospel-centered. We bear Kingdom-fruit. We have a global reach. We are reaching the lost. We are serving the underserved. We truly are seeking to be the hands and feet of Jesus in our community and around the world. And yet we are obscure. We are not the biggest or fastest growing or most “successful” church around. We simply do the work God has called us to day in and day out. It’s awesome.

Anonymity - No one knows my name. I have no platform. No influence. No power. I am simply a pastor. One beggar telling another where to find bread. I have no need to build a brand. I do not aspire to high position. My goal is simply to preach the gospel, die, and be forgotten.

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

Friends, I wish I could describe the blessings that flow when you truly let go of the need to build your own house and instead turn your plans over to God. I wish I could describe the joy and peace that I wake up with every morning because I no longer find myself striving so hard to make my own way in the world. I wish I could describe the intimacy of the relationships I’ve forged with my wife and children and church family. It’s truly incredible. All because I’ve surrendered my need to make a name for myself. God is at work and His plan for me is more than enough.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 8-9, 1 Chronicles 18

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May 3, 2022
Soli Deo Gloria

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 8-9, 1 Chronicles 18

Soli Deo Gloria. A fancy (Latin) way of saying, “To the glory of God alone.” If I were to ever get a tattoo, this would be it. I’d have it written across my heart. It is the North Star of the Christian life. It is our highest priority. Our greatest passion. Our deepest love. It is the principle that guides every other principle by which we live and move and have our being. Everything we think. Everything we feel. Everything we say. Everything we do. All of it directed towards the glory of God. All of it designed to bring honor to God. All of it offered freely and humbly in praise to God.

Soli Deo Gloria. This is immediately what I thought when I read these words from 2 Samuel 8:11-12, “These (articles of silver, gold, and bronze) also King David dedicated to the Lord, together with the silver and gold he dedicated from all the nations he subdued, from Edom, Moab, the Ammonites, the Philistines, Amalie, and from the spoil of Hadadezer the son of Rehoboam, king of Zobah.” Think about how easy it would have been for David to believe his own hype. Think about how tempting it would have been for David to claim all the glory from all these victories for himself. I can imagine him in his tent looking over the map at the number of kings and tribes he had conquered and feeling pretty good about himself. How easy it would have been for him to simply reach out and claim it all. But David loved God. David knew he would still be keeping sheep if it weren’t for God. David knew he would have died long ago at the hands of Goliath if it hadn’t been for God. David knew his life up to this point was a testimony to the favor of God. So when the spoils of war start to flood into his camp, he dedicates the treasure to the Lord. This would have been a powerful sign to all who followed David - and probably to those who warred against David - as to who deserves the credit and the glory and the honor for all that has taken place. It’s not David. It’s God.

Soli Deo Gloria. It’s the phrase that comes to mind every time I reflect on all God has done for me in my life. The many different ministries I get to be involved in. As a pastor at PEPC, I’ve had a front row seat to hundreds of professions of faith over the last 12+ years. I’ve watched our church family make a huge impact in our community through our work with the DC Oakes and Legend High School or the launch of Douglas County Christian Counseling or our partnerships with the Parker Task Force or the Chamber of Commerce at Parker Days. As a professor at Denver Seminary, I get to impact the next generation of church leaders and it’s one of the great joys of my life to follow them in their careers as they go forth to share the gospel in all sorts of settings and contexts. As a leader in our denomination, I get to work with struggling churches and pastors and do all I can to encourage and help them along the way. As a board member of the Petros Network, I get train church planters and celebrate huge milestones like our 6,000th church plant and our 1,000,000th convert! It’s always tempting to claim some of the credit for myself. Always tempting to keep a bit of the glory for myself. But then I remember how far God has brought me. From the ash heap of my ministry career in Sun Prairie, WI with my marriage and family on the rocks to where I am today and all I can do is fall to my knees in gratitude. I don’t deserve any of this. I achieved none of this on my own. God gets all the glory for where I find myself in life.

Soli Deo Gloria. No matter where you find yourself in your spiritual journey, let me encourage you to make this your chief end. Your highest aim. Surrender all that you are and all that you have to Christ. Place all your resources of time and talent and treasure as His disposal. Give Him permission to use you as He sees fit. Then hold on for the ride! It will be the greatest, most exciting, most exhilarating adventure of your life! Trust me when I say God never disappoints!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 10, 1 Chronicles 19, Psalms 20, 53, 60, 75

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May 4, 2022
Soli Deo Gloria?

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 10, 1 Chronicles 19, Psalms 20, 53, 60, 75

I love these words of David from Psalms 20. “Now I know that the Lord saves his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with the saving might of his right hand. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.” (Psalms 20:6-7) David has just won significant victories over the Ammonites and Syrians. He has subdued their lands. Defeated their armies. Killed their generals. Historians of this particular time tell us David was a powerful warlord who took advantage of a power vacuum in the region to carve out his kingdom. Egypt, the dominant power for so long, was weak. Assyria and Babylon had yet to rise. As David wins victory after victory, he steps up to the postgame mic to give God all the glory.

It’s a good thing to ascribe to God all the glory for our successes in life. After all, He is the one who gave us our gifts and talents. He is the one who provides blessing and opportunity. We didn’t choose where we were born. We didn’t choose the family we were born into. So much of our success has nothing to do with us at all and so God rightly deserves all the praise. But what about when things go wrong? What about when tragedy strikes? What about the hard times that take us to the end of ourselves and beyond? David faced those times as well and still He praised God. Still he gave all the glory to God. Listen to what he writes in Psalm 60, “O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses; you have been angry; oh, restore us...you have made your people see hard things; given us wine to drink that made us stagger...Oh grant us help against the foe, for vain is the salvation of man! With God we shall do valiantly; it is He who will tread down our foes.”

Years ago, a favorite coach of mine was running off the field after a big victory. His team had struggled for years. The losses had piled up. Many were calling for his job. A reporter chased him down and asked him what the key was to the victory. I still remember the coach’s reply, “God was with us in the victory today but He was also with us through every single defeat leading up to this point.” Wow! That’s a man who understands God! He gave God the glory for both his victories and defeats. His successes and failures. His high times and low times. He knew God was with him no matter what. What about you? Do you feel the same way? You may be experiencing a season of great blessing in your life right now. A season of success. A season where everything you touch seems to turn to gold. Or you may be experiencing loss. Tragedy. Struggle. Heartbreak. No matter what season you find yourself in, give God the glory. Trust Him for the journey. Believe He is with you and for you and will deliver those He loves!

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 65-67, 69-70

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May 5, 2022
His Story

Readings for today: Psalms 65-67, 69-70

I still remember one of my professors in college walking to the board on the first day of class and writing in big block letters the word, “HISTORY.” “History”, she said, “is all about ‘his’ story and the first thing we need to do is reclaim this word for the rest of us.” She then took out an eraser and re-wrote “HISTORY” as “HERSTORY” or “HYSTORY.” Now, admittedly, this was a Women’s Studies course at the University of Colorado at Boulder. So perhaps I should have expected something like this. And my initial reaction was pretty sarcastic and dismissive. However, over the years, I have come to believe the professor was more right than she knew at the time. History truly is “HIS STORY.” Not a “male” story of course but the story of God’s engagement with His world and His people.

The Psalms express these deep theological truths so well. David writes about creation. “O God of our salvation, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas; the one who by his strength established the mountains, being girded with might; who stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples, so that those who dwell at the ends of the earth are in awe at your signs. You make the going out of the morning and the evening to shout for joy.” (Psalms 65:5-8) He writes about redemption. “Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds toward the children of man. He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There did we rejoice in him, who rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations— let not the rebellious exalt themselves.” (Psalms 66:5-7) He speaks to God’s sovereignty. “Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth.” (Psalms 67:3-4) He speaks to God’s tenderness and comfort. “But as for me, my prayer is to you, O Lord. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love answer me in your saving faithfulness.” (Psalms 69:13) The beauty of the Psalms is how they express the full range of human emotion and experience. They validate so much of what we feel and experience on a daily basis.

When you reflect on your own life, do you see God’s hand at work? Do you sense God’s abiding presence in times of crisis? Are you able to see God’s sovereign hand guiding and directing your steps? Where have you experienced God’s love? When did you encounter God’s grace? God is just as active in our personal histories as He is in human history. David was able to see God’s handiwork all around him from creation to salvation to the rise and fall of nations to the personal attention God pays to those he loves in times of struggle and heartbreak. David has been my teacher over the years. Helping me see the events of my life through God’s eternal lens. The more I spend time in the Psalms, the more I realize the closeness of God in every season of my life. Take some time today to reflect on the many, many ways God has been faithful to you.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 11-12, 1 Chronicles 20, Psalms 51

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May 6, 2022

Abuse

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 11-12, 1 Chronicles 20, Psalms 51

The story of David and Bathsheba is perhaps the most well-known stories of abuse in Scripture. David, flush with his success on the battlefield and drunk on his own power, decides to stay home rather than head off to war. As he stands on the roof, proudly overlooking all he has accomplished, he catches a glimpse of the beautiful Bathsheba bathing beneath him. His heart fills with lust. He covets this beautiful woman and who's around to stop him? The army is off at war. Her husband is one of David's mighty men which means he's probably on the front lines. There's no one around to protect her. No one to plead her cause. Her husband's close relationship with the king suggests Bathsheba and David probably knew each other. Who knows how long David's been waiting for this chance? Perhaps this was a secret desire he'd been entertaining for years. So he calls for her. Commands her to come. With her life on the line, she obeys and conceives a child from the one night stand. Now comes the coverup. David sends for Uriah. He's hoping Uriah will use his furlough to sleep with his wife. But Uriah holds fast to his integrity. He refuses to take the bait. So David orchestrates his murder.

It's a horrible story. One we cannot and should not try to explain away or gloss over or reduce to a morality tale. Bathsheba is raped. Uriah murdered. A child dies. All because of David's insatiable lust and appetite for power. Left to his own devices, David might have gotten away with it. But God was watching. God is always watching. "For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun." (2 Samuel 12:12) God sends Nathan the prophet, David's own brother you'll remember, to confront him. Nathan risks his life to stand up to David. Expose his sin. Call him out. And though David repents, the ripple effect of his sin will impact his family and his people for years to come.

Sadly, this story is all too familiar. I cannot tell you the number of pastors and ministry leaders (all men by the way) I've watched fall from grace. Drunk with their own success and power, they believe themselves to be untouchable. Beyond accountability. In their arrogance and pride, they take advantage of the weak and vulnerable. I've personally had to lead efforts to remove six such pastors over the years. When confronted, they use all kinds of justifications to defend their sexual and spiritual abuse. I've sat with their victims and listened to heart-rending stories of grooming, gaslighting, emotional manipulation, and blame-shifting. These local stories mirror the celebrity cases that have hit the news in recent years. And the ripple effect impacts families, churches, and organizations. In fact, it often destroys them.

God will not be mocked. What we try to do in secret, He will expose. He will not let sin go unpunished. He hates abuse of every kind. He stands with the victims against those who would use their power to wound, exploit, and oppress. He holds leaders especially accountable for the way they treat those under their care. Those Christians called to leadership inside the church or outside the church must hold themselves to a higher standard. We must constantly ask God to search our hearts and root out any sin that may have taken root lest it blossom into something destructive.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 32, 86, 102-103, 122

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May 7, 2022
Confession

Readings for today: Psalms 32, 86, 102-103, 122

The more I spend time with people, the more I am convinced that so much of our pain and heartache and struggle is because we do not truly understand who we are. We have a distorted self-image. We look in the mirror and we are blind to the true nature of the person looking back at us. This is why reading and re-reading and re-reading Scripture is so important. Within the pages of this precious book, God teaches us the deepest truths about ourselves. The narrative runs something like this...

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27) You and I were designed to live in a world of perfection. A paradise called Eden. We were made in the image of God so that we might show forth the glory of God. We were given dominion and authority and power to rule over all God has made as a kind of vice-regent or undershepherd.

“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” (Psalms 51:5) We abandoned our vocation. We rebelled against God. We aspired to be gods ourselves. In so doing, the image of God was marred. Corrupted. Poisoned. Every single human being since Adam and Eve’s fall has been born in brokenness. Born in sin. Conceived in iniquity. From the moment the sperm fertilizes the egg, we are lost.

“Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3) We are lost but we are not hopeless! Out of love, the Father sent His only Son into the world that whosoever would believe in Him would not perish in their sin. All who believe in Christ are born again. Born a second time. This time of the Spirit.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” (2 Corinthians 5:17) Being born of the Spirit literally changes our DNA. Changes the fundamental reality of our existence. Gives us a new nature. A new heart. A heart of flesh sensitive to the leading of God to replace the heart of stone that was so rebellious and resistant. The image of God is now restored. Our vocation renewed. The commission re-issued. Go. Make disciples of all nations. Baptize. Teach. Fill the earth. Subdue. Have dominion. Share my glory with all of creation.

“In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.” (1 Corinthians 15:52) The final promise. Jesus will come again. On the last day, a trumpet shall sound. The heavens will open. The dead will rise. And we shall be changed from one degree of glory to another. The imperfect shall be made perfect. The perishable shall be made imperishable. Sin and death will be destroyed. Eternity sets in. We are home.

This is the fundamental worldview of the Psalmist. It’s the fundamental narrative they are singing about though the revelation of Jesus as Messiah still lies far off in the future. They trust in the steadfast love and faithfulness of the Father to bring about His will on the earth. They also understand this side of heaven that we are broken, sinful, corrupt creatures in desperate need of God’s grace. And grace only comes as we confess. As we repent. It’s more than feeling bad. More than feeling guilty. More than feeling ashamed. It’s about turning from our sin. Turning towards God. Making the necessary changes in our lives in response to all God has done for us. “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,

whose sin is covered...I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin." (Psalms 32:1, 5)

What do you need to confess today? Where have you fallen short? Where do you feel enslaved? Afflicted? Ashamed? Guilty? In what areas of your life has the Spirit brought conviction? Is it your thoughts? Attitudes? Actions? Feelings? The life of a believer in Jesus is one of constant confession as we come before the Lord acknowledging our sin, receiving His grace, and learn to follow in His ways. Does this mean we should live our lives in constant guilt? Live our lives in constant shame? Absolutely not! God's love is everlasting! And His promise is sure! "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." (Psalms 103:11-12) Cling to the love of God, sinner! Let His love be the cornerstone of your life! Let His grace set you free! Trust in His faithfulness to save you from depths of your sin!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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May 9, 2022
Dysfunction

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 13-15

All families live with some level of dysfunction. Dysfunction occurs where unhealthy behavior (rage, addiction, abuse, neglect, etc.) is normalized, leading members of a family to make unhealthy accommodations rather than pursue repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Left unchecked, dysfunction leads destructive patterns of behavior that often impact generations as unhealthy coping skills are passed down from parent to child. Breaking generational cycles of sin is extremely difficult and requires incredible courage as well as sacrifice as dysfunctional family systems often violently resist change. The same is true in human societies as well. They are simply “family systems” at a macro level.

The family of King David is perhaps the pre-eminent Biblical example of the dysfunctional family system. Of course, his situation is made much more complex by the cultural practice of polygamy which led to many children by many different wives and concubines, all seeking to ascend the line of succession. Dynastic considerations complicate what we read today but many lessons can be drawn that are helpful in our own lives. Amnon is the oldest son of David and heir apparent to the throne. As such, he has grown accustomed to power and privilege and simply taking what he wants when he wants it. His treatment of Tamar, his half-sister, is horrific in its own right but probably emblematic of how Amnon lives his life. Absalom is not much better. What begins as a noble desire to protect his sister from public shame ends in murder and a coup attempt against his own father. Who knows what prompted Absalom’s move against David but it clearly was pre-meditated and even assisted by some of David’s closest confidants. David doesn’t help matters much. As king, he should have punished Amnon for his crime but instead appears to give him a pass. Once Absalom takes matters into his own hands, David appears both relieved and appalled. He refuses to forgive and reconcile with Absalom which only isolates him further and divides the royal household. David chooses to ignore the growing conspiracy until its almost too late and thus has to flee into exile. His family is shattered. His kingdom is divided. His country stands on the brink of civil war.

I think of my own family system. Several years ago, we went to counseling together to try and break dysfunctional patterns in our own lives. I had to learn to deal more effectively with my anger issues. I had to wrestle with my fears and failures and disappointments. I had to face the fact that I caused my children pain through the choices I made in how I responded to the different circumstances we faced as a family. I had to take a long hard look at myself through Christ’s eyes and repent. Ask for forgiveness. Pursue reconciliation. It wasn’t easy. It’s still not easy! It requires humility and sacrifice. I have to relinquish my need for control. My need to protect my kids from the consequences of the choices they make in life. My need to project “success” to the world around me. I’ve had to come to grips with the fact that my family is as broken as any and I am a major contributor to that brokenness because of my own sin issues. Honestly, it’s a painful journey. Then again, dying to self is always painful.

What about your family system? If your family’s story was included in the Scriptures, what would others see? What failures? What successes? Would they see patterns of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation? Or would they see pride, neglect, abuse, addiction, and rampant conflict? Or perhaps a mixture of both? Where is Christ at work in your family right now? What areas do you need Christ to pay particular attention to in order to bring healing, wholeness, grace and peace? Are there particular family members you need to be praying specifically for? Who are they? What are the issues? How are you contributing to the pain? Ask Christ to help you chart a different path. One that leads to true transformation.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 3-4, 13, 28, 55

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May 10, 2022
The Lord is our Shield

Readings for today: Psalms 3-4, 13, 28, 55

”But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head.” (Ps. 3:3)

“In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.” (Ps. 4:8)

“But I have trusted in Your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because He has dealt bountifully with me.” (Ps. 13:5-6)

“The Lord is my strength and my shield; in Him my heart trusts, and I am helped; my heart exults, and with song I give thanks to him. The Lord is the strength of His people; He is the saving refuge of His anointed.” (Ps. 28:7-8)

“Cast your burden on the Lord, and He will sustain you; He will never permit the righteous to be moved.” (Ps. 55:22)

These are some of my favorite verses in the Psalms. In the midst of civil war and exile and hardship, David sings of the goodness of God. He sings of the faithfulness of God. He sings of provision and protection of God. A careful reader will naturally ask “why?” Why would David rest on such promises when his entire kingdom has been upended? How can David be so confident when his own flesh and blood has betrayed him? Is David naive? Is David’s faith blind? Is he just putting spiritual platitudes and cliches to music? Not at all.

David is a man well acquainted with grief and sorrow. David is a man who’s seen violence and evil and suffering up close and personal. David is a man who’s grappled with his own demons. He is no innocent. He is no snowflake. He is no dilettante. He’s come by his faith honestly. He’s taken great risks over the course of his life and found God faithful. He’s met God on the mountaintops in his great victories. He’s met God at the bottom of the pit in his sin and despair. Through it all David has learned some things. He’s learned he’s a broken man. A man capable of great evil. A man who is as susceptible to pride and corruption as anyone. Perhaps more so because of the position he holds. He’s also learned God is steadfast and faithful. He will literally never let David go. This gives David comfort when times get hard which is why he’s able to pen the words above.

The great John Newton - author of Amazing Grace - once remarked towards the end of his life that had learned two things. First, he was a great sinner. Second, Christ was an even greater Savior. Newton had been a slave ship captain for many years before becoming active in the abolitionist movement. I imagine he lived with much regret for the things he had done and the way he had helped perpetuate one of the great evils in human history. And yet, Newton also knew God’s love was greater and more faithful still! It’s why he could write, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

What about you? How did it feel to read the Psalms today? We’re several months into our Bible reading plan and it’s easy to forget or just go through the motions. Let me encourage you to really take some time today and pray over the verses listed above. Let God’s Spirit impress them deep on your heart. Maybe even memorize them so you have them to hold onto when times get difficult as they invariably will. Life in this world is hard. Live for any length of time and you will become well

acquainted with grief and sorrow. You will probably witness violence and evil and suffering. You may even experience it firsthand yourself. You will have to grapple with your own demons just like David and John Newton did. But as you bring yourself before the Lord each day authentically and honestly and transparently, you will find in Him a refuge. A shield. A comfort. A peace. This is His promise to all who would follow Him.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 16-18

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May 11, 2022
Failing to Forgive

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 16-18

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

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

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

And yet, Jesus' words continue to haunt us. Continue to push us. Continue to convict us. Forgiveness and reconciliation are essential to the Christian life. Coming to terms with our brothers and sisters is required by Jesus if we are to call ourselves His disciples. We are not given any other options. Jesus doesn't leave us any other choices. Jesus wants His family to be unified not just in name but from the heart.

“Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us...For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matthew 6:12, 14-15)

“Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18:21-22)

“And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." (Mark 11:25)

Think of the pain that could have been avoided had David listened to God. Think of the pain in our own lives that could be avoided if only we would listen to God. Who is Jesus calling you to forgive today?

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 26, 40-41, 58, 61-62, 64

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May 12, 2022

“40”

Readings for today: Psalms 26, 40-41, 58, 61-62, 64

It's easy to forget that the Psalms were actually songs. They were set to music. They were meant to be sung not just read or spoken aloud. The people of Israel sang them when they gathered for worship. They sang them in their homes and villages. They sang them whenever they got together to give God praise.

One of my favorite rock groups of all time is U2. Many years ago, they put Psalm 40 to music. Gathered a crowd of thousands of people in 1983 at Red Rocks to sing it. Though I wasn't present at that particular concert, the video of it is powerful and brings back memories of other concerts I attended where Bono belted out these biblical lyrics to a largely secular audience and they joined him in singing with all their hearts.

<https://youtu.be/CMVghDg-ePc>

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 19-21, Psalms 5, 8, 42

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May 13, 2022
Division

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 19-21, Psalms 5, 38, 42

We are a fickle people by nature. Driven by our emotions, we struggle to forgive. Struggle to reconcile. Struggle to work past our pain. Our differences. Our jealousies. Our frustrations. Our failures. These struggles lead us to division as we each go our own way.

David grieves for his son Absalom and almost loses his kingdom a second time.

The ten tribes of Israel grow jealous of the tribe of Judah and rebel a second time under the leadership of Sheba.

Shimei comes before the king seeking forgiveness for his rash words when David was fleeing for his life. Abishai wants to execute him on the spot.

Mephibosheth and Ziba both lay claim to the king's favor.

Joab kills Amasa in cold blood out of anger at being relieved of command.

Israel suffers because of an ungodly act committed by King Saul against the Gibeonites and makes atonement through human sacrifice.

We humans have a tendency to make a mess of things. It is just so hard for us to take a step back and see the bigger picture. We are highly reactive creatures. Refusing to give others the benefit of the doubt. Refusing to extend grace to those who have hurt us or disappointed us or let us down. We would much rather hold onto our anger. Hold onto our pain. Keep a detailed record of wrongs that we can trot out anytime we feel threatened or afraid. We justify our actions or inactions and the cycle of division continues.

Think about how we do life these days. Many jump from church to church to church, never really putting down roots. Just as soon as we are let down or disappointed, we move on. Always with a "godly" justification, of course. "I'm not being fed." "I don't feel connected." "I don't like this pastor or that leader or they didn't meet my needs." It's just easier to move down the street to the next church rather than work through our issues. Think about the number of different denominations that exist today. While some diversity may be legitimate, the fact that we divide over such petty, non-essential issues is a stain on the Body of Christ. It is direct rebellion against the command of our Lord to be one, even as He and the Father are one.

But it's not just churches who have this issue. It is society as a whole. Republicans and Democrats can't even exist in the same room anymore. Conservatives and liberals see themselves as mortal enemies. How many parents have I watched switch their kid to a different sports team rather than work through disappointment and conflict? How many schools and teachers have watched families walk out their door because of a bad experience rather than sit down and work through the issues? How many businesses lose long-time customers over the smallest of disappointments? The examples are legion in our culture today.

Division leads to weakness. The inability to face our fears, admit our failures, and work through problems creates a lack of resiliency emotionally, physically, and spiritually in both the individual and society as a whole. We simply lack the capacity to process our pain and disappointment in a healthy way. We look for someone to blame. We attack. We accuse. We react. We rush in. And the results are often tragic.

So what's the answer? Confession. "For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me...I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning...I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart. O Lord, all my longing is before you; my sighing is not hidden from you." (Psalms 38:4, 6, 8-9) Humility. "But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you. Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me." (Psalms 5:7-8) Seeking God. "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?" (Psalms 42:1-2)

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 22-23, Psalms 57

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May 14, 2022
Thy will or thy will?

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 22-23, Psalms 57

“There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done. ' All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it.” - C.S.

Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

I thought about these words from Lewis when I read 2 Samuel 22:26-28 today. “With the merciful you show yourself merciful; with the blameless person you show yourself blameless; with the purified you deal purely, and with the crooked you make yourself seem tortuous. You save a humble people, but your eyes are on the proud to bring them down.” There is a reciprocity to our relationship with God. He promises to draw near those who draw near to Him. (James 4:8) This is not a “works-righteousness” philosophy. This isn’t about earning God’s favor or trying to win your way into heaven. It’s simply a recognition of the reality that those who truly seek God with all their heart will quite naturally find themselves longing to draw near to Him. Longing to be more like Him. Longing to take on the characteristics and qualities God has revealed about Himself. God is merciful and gracious so the “God-seeker” will naturally want to become merciful and gracious themselves. God is blameless and righteous so the God-seeker will naturally want to follow God’s law and obey His commands. God is pure and holy so the God-seeker will naturally separate themselves from anything resembling sin. And the key to becoming this kind of person is humility. Dying to self so that we might live for the glory of God alone.

Now here’s the really crazy thing. Through the wonders of neuroscience, we now know that the thoughts, attitudes, and actions we engage in literally shape and re-shape our brains. Myelin sheaths form along our neural pathways which, in turn, become self-reinforcing. It’s why it’s so hard the older we get, the harder it is for us to change. Some patterns have just become too ingrained. Hopefully, our parents helped us set godly patterns when we were young. Setting our feet on the path towards righteousness so that when we got older we didn’t depart from it. Sadly, far too many of us had sinful patterns of selfishness, greed, addiction, indulgence, etc. as our parents mowed down every potential obstacle, insulated us from every disappointment, and protected us against all hardship and pain. The result is not only a lack of resiliency and an unwillingness to grow up and take on responsibility but even more tragically, we have become proud and self-centered. We demand our own way and we refuse to submit even to God.

What do we expect will happen when we come before the judgment throne of God at the end of our lives? Do we really expect a person who has spent a lifetime pursuing their own ends and chasing their own dreams to suddenly do an about face? Do we really expect a person who has spent a lifetime accumulating great wealth and indulging every desire and pursuing every pleasure to suddenly surrender these things to God? Here’s the hard but honest truth. God will not force anyone to spend eternity with Him. No one ends up in a place they did not choose. Even now, we are charting a course towards heaven or hell. The thoughts, attitudes, and actions we engage in are shaping us and preparing us for where we will spend eternity. What kind of person are you? What kind of person are you in the process of becoming? Are you intentionally cultivating a way of life that says to God, “Thy will be done” or are you intentionally cultivating a way of life that says to God, “My will be done?” There is no middle ground. There is no neutral territory. You are either on the path towards heaven or the path towards hell. Let the Spirit set your feet on the narrow path that leads to salvation!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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May 16, 2022
God Reigns!

Readings for today: Psalms 97-99

When I look at the world around me, I find it easy to get discouraged. My wife tells me it's because I pay far too much attention to the news on and I will readily admit I have a difficult time turning it off. The brutal invasion of Russia into Ukraine. Severe drought and famine in eastern Africa. Food insecurity and starvation in so many parts of the world. The impact of climate change on developing nations. Persecution of fellow Christians in countries where it is illegal to worship much less share the good news of the gospel. The deeper the Spirit takes me into Christ, the more these things effect me. I am often troubled when I pray. I often find myself brooding over the chaos of the world. Wondering when God will finally put an end to it all.

I am just as troubled for events here at home. The mass shootings at local grocery stores and churches. The rise in white supremacy and other hate groups. The desperate plight of the poor as inflation continues to rise. The rage that seems to simmer under the surface of our society. The impotence of our political leadership who are more beholden to hyper-partisanship than they are the welfare of our nation. Even more locally, I am baffled by the ability of people to walk away from relationships they've cultivated for years. Troubled by our wide-spread lack of resiliency. Our inability to process disappointment and pain in healthy ways. The deeper the Spirit takes me into Christ, the more I realize how essential forgiveness and reconciliation are to the life of any community. Be it a family, church, school, business, town, etc. We simply cannot survive without it and yet fewer and fewer people seem capable of grace.

I am broken by the personal and pastoral experiences I've had recently. I recently officiated a memorial service for a 32 year old young man. Sitting with the family in their grief broke my heart. I have another dear friend who is a young dad potentially facing an uncertain future due to an unexpected diagnosis. I know several couples who are struggling to hold their marriages and families together. I know too many teenagers who are fighting depression and anxiety. Yes, I know this is part of what I signed up for but it doesn't make it any easier. I certainly am no superman. My heart breaks on almost continual basis for those I love and have the privilege to serve.

So where do I go to find hope? I turn to the Psalms. Listen again to these glorious, encouraging words. "The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice. Clouds and thick darkness surround him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side. His lightning lights up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth. The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all peoples see his glory." (Psalm 97:1-6) What a declaration of hope! God reigns! Not God will reign or God has reigned. No! God reigns in the present tense! He reigns in the here and now. He reigns over the chaos. He reigns over the pain. He reigns over disease and death. He reigns over it all. Globally. Domestically. Locally. Personally. God reigns! And because God reigns, I can be glad. Even in the midst of all my fears. Even as I stumble under the weight of all my burdens. Even when I am discouraged or troubled or broken. God reigns. I can rejoice. "Light shines on the righteous and joy on the upright in heart. Rejoice in the Lord, you who are righteous, and praise his holy name." (Psalm 97:11-12)

Now I know many will argue this doesn't change a thing. It's not like war and violence and sickness and suffering are going away anytime soon. They will use world events as evidence to push back

against the idea of a good and holy and righteous and sovereign God. They will argue it's impossible for God to be all these things when there is so much wrong in the world. This leaves us with one of only two conclusions...so they say. Either God isn't good. Isn't holy. Isn't righteous. And perhaps doesn't care. Or God is not sovereign. He is not all-powerful. He doesn't reign and is at the mercy of the same forces we are that operate with impunity in our world. To be honest, if I didn't have faith. If I hadn't encountered God personally. If I didn't know God on an intimate level, I might be tempted to agree.

But I do believe. I do have faith. Even in the darkness, I trust the light will one day dawn. Even when the world is crashing down around me, I trust the One who holds all things in His hands. Even when the lives of those I love seem to be falling apart, I trust the One who holds all things together. God reigns! God is on His throne! God is sovereignly directing all things for His glorious purposes! So I will sing! I will "sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations. He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God." (Psalm 98:1-3)

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 24, 1 Chronicles 21-22, Psalms 30

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May 17, 2022
Addiction

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 24, 1 Chronicles 21-22, Psalms 30

The more experts study the impact of social media on our mental health, the more scary the results become. The data is clear and unequivocal. Prolonged social media use presents like addiction with similar accompanying symptoms. The more we use social media, the less happy we seem to be and the more socially isolated we become. The comparisons social media invites between our mundane, everyday lives and someone else's highlight reel doesn't feel good and yet we cannot bring ourselves to quit. Why is it so hard? It is because social media is specifically designed to trigger dopamine "highs" in the brain. Dopamine release is triggered by unpredictability, small bits of information that can be digested quickly, and most importantly, reward cues. (i.e. number of "likes" on FB, number of "followers" on Instagram, number of "retweets" on Twitter, etc.)

I think about the number of people I know who draw at least a part of their self-worth off the number of friends they have on Facebook. The number of times people hit the "heart" button on an Instagram pic. The number of retweets and "likes" a pithy phrase gets on Twitter or the amount of views on a YouTube video. Especially young people. But it's not just social media. I think of the number of pastors I know who draw their self-worth off the number of people who show up on a weekend for worship. I think of the drive there is in most churches to grow their online audience. I know some pastors who seem to live or die based on whether they make OutReach Magazine's Top 100 list. I think of the uncritical assumptions too many Christians make that larger churches must be doing something "right" and smaller churches must be doing something "wrong." Or the reverse. I think of the number of folks I know who criticize large churches simply because they're large. I once belonged to a denomination where the salaries of all of the pastors in each region were published and voted on each year. I remember one older man who came from a very small church standing up to rail against large church pastors whose salaries were more than his entire church's budget. Never mind the differences in scale or complexities of the job. He just didn't like big churches and made his opinions known.

Why are we so obsessed with numbers? It does seem to be an American phenomenon. I travel the world fairly regularly. I've been to China, Mexico, South Korea, Ethiopia, Uganda, etc. I've interacted with pastors from all around the world in lots of different settings. In my experience, they just don't seem as hung up as we are on numbers. That isn't to say they ignore them. They pay attention. They evaluate. They are wise and discerning. But there doesn't seem to be the emotional attachment American Christians, and especially American pastors, seem to have with attendance, buildings, and budgets. It's like we get a dopamine "high" every time the sanctuary's full.

It's why I find this story about David in our reading today so convicting. David wants to number his people. He wants to know the size of his army. He wants to measure his power. His influence. His accomplishments. He wants to feel secure. Safe. In control. The images I have in my head are of third-world despots throwing military parades to show off their strength. David is clearly feeling insecure and in that moment, Satan strikes. He comes along and tempts David according to 1 Chronicles 21 and God allows it to happen according to 2 Samuel 24. The results are tragic. "Thus says the Lord, 'Choose what you will: either three years of famine, or three months of devastation by your foes while the sword of your enemies overtakes you, or else three days of the sword of the Lord, pestilence on the land, with the angel of the Lord destroying throughout all the territory of Israel.' Now decide what answer I shall return to him who sent me." (1 Chronicles 21:11-12) God is going to teach David a lesson in humility. And the lesson is harsh and brutal.

70,000 die from the plague. This is horrific and we cannot understand why God would do such a thing. At the same time, we have to remember that such events take place at the mysterious intersection of God's will and human freedom. David's decision has consequences and because David is king, the consequences impact his people. The same is true even for us today. The decisions our politicians make impact real people in real life and can cause real pain and suffering. David decides to number his fighting men and around the same time, a plague begins. It is brutal. Virulent. And it kills. Somewhere in David's mind. In the prophet Gad's mind. Probably in Joab's mind and the minds of so many others, these events are related. The plague is perceived as God's punishment on Israel for David's sinful choices. And perhaps it is. We cannot dismiss the possibility out of hand for God's ways are not our ways and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. He has clearly told His people over and over again that there are consequences...real, life-threatening consequences...for sin. God's justice and righteousness will not be mocked.

So how do we respond? What does this mean for our lives? First and foremost, it should lead us to confession. Repentance. It should call to mind all the times we too have placed our faith in numbers. Our mental health and well-being in the number of likes we get from social media. None of us are immune. Second, it should lead us to the cross. To the place where the penalty for our sin was paid. To the place where God's judgment was fully and completely and utterly satisfied by the death of our Lord. We are not condemned. We need not feel any shame. God has done for us what we could not. Third, it should inspire us to live for Him. To live from that place of grace knowing God has torn down the dividing wall of hostility that exists between us and made peace with us by the blood of His cross. We are forgiven so we can forgive others. Grace was extended to us so we can extend it to others. Love was shown to us so we can show love to others. We can rest secure in God's hands.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 108-109

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May 18, 2022
Suffering

Readings for today: Psalms 108-109

I have walked into great suffering. The people of the land into which I have come are suffering under a brutal drought. Famine has robbed them of their food supply. Plagues of locusts have stolen what little was left over the years. They are in danger of mass starvation. Compounding this terrible and tragic condition is prevalence of khat. A powerful drug that is a major cash crop in eastern Ethiopia. Plane loads of the stuff are shipped all over the Horn of Africa. But much of it stays right here. So many of the locals suffer from addiction to this drug. They chew the leaves and then lay blasted out of their minds on the sidewalks and streets of the city. It's heartbreaking. Layer in the widespread poverty. The ongoing and historic tensions between tribes. And the violence that breaks out occasionally and it makes for an utterly hopeless condition.

I imagine David was familiar with such suffering. Anyone who can write these words knows suffering intimately. "For I am poor and needy, and my heart is stricken within me. I am gone like a shadow at evening; I am shaken off like a locust. My knees are weak through fasting; my body has become gaunt, with no fat. I am an object of scorn to my accusers; when they see me, they wag their heads." David has experienced much suffering over the course of his life. Despite being called a "man after God's own heart", his life was not always up and to the right. He didn't jump from spiritual mountaintop to spiritual mountaintop. Quite the opposite. He suffered early in his reign. He suffered in the middle of his reign. And here he is at the end of his reign...suffering. He lived on the run when he first was anointed. Fleeing the wrath of Saul. He was betrayed by one of his own sons who launched a rebellion to try to take the kingdom from him. His own sinful pride and lust for power cost him dearly on more than one occasion. David suffers from external forces outside his control and he suffers from internal forces - also outside his control - that exist inside his own heart.

Does any of this sound or feel familiar? It should. This is the story of our lives as well. We are all subject to the principalities and powers of this world. Political forces that pass laws and public policy that impact us on a daily basis. Cultural and social forces that push against all forms of godliness. Economic forces that rise and fall according to the whims of the free market. Global forces that affect supply chains and deny us access to some of the basic staples of life. Not only that, we all suffer from a sinful human nature. The passions and desires that fill our hearts are naturally oriented away from God. It's why we seem so susceptible to violence, deceit, greed, and selfishness. We are a broken people in desperate need of grace.

David agrees. "Help me, O Lord my God! Save me according to your steadfast love! Let them know that deliverance comes from your hand; you, O Lord, have done it!...With my mouth I will give great thanks to the Lord; I will praise Him in the midst of the throng. For He stands at the right hand of the needy one, to save him from those who condemn his soul to death." This is my prayer this week for my brothers and sisters over here in eastern Ethiopia. May it be our prayer as well! May we look to God in the midst of our suffering and trust Him to stand at our right hand in our hour of need.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 23-26

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May 19, 2022
Putting your House in Order

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 23-26

One of the great privileges of my job is to walk with families as their loved ones experience their final days. It's usually a tender time as everyone gathers to say goodbye. It can be a complicated time as well especially if the person has not taken the time to get their affairs in order. Perhaps they never signed a DNR or prepared an advance directive. The result is the family remains in the dark as to their end of life wishes and it causes unnecessary suffering. Perhaps they never prepared a will or talked to their family about how to settle the estate after they die. The result is conflict as surviving family members fight one another for their share. I remember one man who put all the property in his name alone which caused his widow to fight through probate. I remember another man who took care of everything for his wife – including driving – leaving her completely at a loss when he passed. At the same time, I've seen what happens when someone does it well. They've prepared all the necessary documents. They've clearly communicated their wishes. They've held a series of family meetings to make sure there is no confusion. This turns out to be one of the greatest blessings someone can give as they take those final steps from this life into the next.

David understood how important it was to set his house in order. He is old. He is dying. His reign is coming to an end. He wants to do all he can to set his son up for success. So he gathers all the leaders of Israel. He organizes them according to their call. He clarifies their roles and responsibilities. The Levites are numbered and charged to work in the house of the Lord. The divisions of the priests are established according to their lineage, divided by lot, and established in their rotations. He then organizes the musicians and sets them apart for their service in worship. Finally, he identifies the gatekeepers, treasurers, and other officials. All in an effort to secure his succession and ensure a smooth transition.

What about you? Is your house in order? Are you prepared to pass on what the Lord has entrusted to you? Do you think about future generations of your family? Future generations of your church family? What kind of legacy are you leaving those who will come after you? Have you communicated your wishes? Signed the necessary paperwork? Done all you can to smooth the way for those who will come after you? These are critical conversations to have with those you love. They represent the essence of godly stewardship.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 131, 138-139, 143-145

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May 20, 2022
The Wondrous Works of God

Readings for today: Psalms 131, 138-139, 143-145

“Why do you go to Africa?” It’s a question I am frequently asked. Especially in light of the fact that this is my fifteenth or sixteenth time over here. Most people could understand coming over here once or twice on a mission trip. But the commitment I’ve made to give my life to this particular Kingdom cause intrigues them. They want to know more. They want to know what motivates me to sacrifice the time and the money to make these trips happen. They want to know what it is about this particular mission that keeps me coming back for more.

In Psalm 145:4, David writes, “One generation shall commend your works to another and shall declare your mighty acts.” Every time I come over here, I get to hear of the mighty works of God. Every time I sit down to interview a church planter, I hear them speak of “the might of God’s awesome deeds.” Over and over again, they declare His greatness and goodness. Many of them put their lives on the line to make His name famous in regions of the world where the name of Jesus Christ has never been spoken. They sing of His glorious splendor. They sing of His righteousness and holiness. They sing of His wondrous works. They tell tales of miraculous healings from disease. Deliverance from addiction. Raising the dead. These signs and wonders draw people to Christ like a moth to flame. Hundreds of new churches are being planted. Tens of thousands are coming to know Christ. It’s simply incredible.

These stories never get old. Not for me. I live for them. I need them like I need the air I breathe. They inspire me. They encourage me. They strengthen me. They lift me up. They fill my heart and soul to overflowing. They remind me God is still very much on His throne. He still very much is on the move in our world. He is still very much building His church and the gates of hell shall not stand against it.

Another thing these stories do is humble me. The men and women I meet have nothing. They come from the deepest poverty. They often lack a good education. They are the poor in spirit and yet to them belongs the kingdom of heaven. They are the meek who shall inherit the earth. Their devotion is pure which is why they see God. It is clear to me as I listen to them share that “the Lord upholds those who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down.” They look to the Lord and He “gives them their food in due season.” They look to the Lord and He “opens His hand to satisfy the desire of every living thing.” They look to the Lord and He “draws near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth. He fulfills the desire of those who fear Him; He hears their cry and saves them.” This is why I come. I need to see the works of the Lord firsthand. I need to bear witness to His goodness in the land of the living. I need to see the wondrous works of God for myself so that “my mouth will speak of the praise of the Lord.”

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 27-29, Psalms 68

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May 21, 2022
Generosity

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 27-29, Psalms 68

The global economy lost trillions due to the pandemic. Throw in natural disasters like hurricanes and super-cyclones or historic droughts and locust plagues and some of the poorest people in the world are now in danger of a famine of biblical proportions according to the latest news from the WHO and UN. They are setting up emergency operations in the most vulnerable countries in order to help provide food security during a time when global supply chains are disrupted and local markets shut down due to violence in places like Ukraine and the lingering effects of the virus. It's heartbreaking. Some ask where is God in the midst of all of this? I believe God turns that question back to us. Where are you? Where are my people? Why do you not take what I have given you and use it to bless others in my name? You see, the reality is God has given us all we need to take care of every single human need in the world today. According to the New York Times, it would take 10 billion dollars a year to provide clean drinking water to the world. Sounds like a lot, doesn't it? It's 1/10 of what Europe spends on alcohol each year and about half of what the US spends on dog food. According to the UN, it would take about 30 billion a year to provide food security for those living in desperate hunger. According to the WHO, it would cost \$58/person to provide everyone with access to basic healthcare. About 371 billion by 2030. The impact? 97 million premature deaths could be averted, including more than 50 million children who currently do not live to see their 5th birthday. 20 million deaths from non-communicable diseases like diabetes, cancer, and heart disease could be prevented. Life expectancy is estimated to jump by potentially 3-9 years. Incredible!

How do we get from here to there? How do we become a more generous people? The kind of givers God loves? King David shows us the way. First and foremost, we must love God supremely. We must love God more than our wealth. More than our lifestyles. More than our safety. More than our comfort. We must love God with our whole hearts. Listen to what David tells his son Solomon. "And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will cast you off forever." (1 Chronicles 28:9) Essentially, the key to Solomon's success. The key to his kingship will be his love for God.

Second, we must recognize God is the giver of all good gifts. "Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name." (1 Chronicles 29:10-13) We don't own a single thing. Everything we have comes from God's own hands. He chose the place of our birth. He endowed us with gifts and talents and abilities. He sovereignly orchestrated the opportunities we've been given. All these things were outside our control and yet they are the secret to our success. Of course we work hard. Of course we do our best. We are not passive in this process. But the foundation of whatever success we've achieved in this life was not laid by our own hands but by God Himself.

Third, we must acknowledge we are unworthy of such divine attention. "But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding." (1 Chronicles 29:14-15) The world is constantly

telling us we “deserve” all we have. We’ve “earned” all we’ve received. We are “good” and “righteous” and “worth” every penny of our wealth. The Bible calls this a lie. We are unworthy sinners. Unworthy of God’s attention. Unworthy to come into His presence. We are sinners in desperate need of grace. Our days are like a shadow. There is no abiding. In a generation or two, all we have accomplished will be dust and no one will even remember our names. But God loves us. He has dealt bountifully with us. He has secured for us an eternal home in the heavens if we will receive His greatest gift...Jesus.

Fourth, once we’ve set our hearts on Christ. Once we’ve acknowledged God as the “sole proprietor” of this world and all that is in it. Once we’ve humbled ourselves in our unworthiness before Him. Our hearts and hands quite naturally open. Our fists unclench. Our fears and doubts fade. And we give. Give generously. Freely. Cheerfully. “I know, my God, that you test the heart and have pleasure in uprightness. In the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you. O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you.” (1 Chronicles 29:17-18)

When it comes to your money...is your heart directed towards God? When it comes to your wealth...do you see it as a tool in God’s hand? In these uncertain times, do you find yourself holding tighter onto what you have? Hunkering down? Doing all you can to preserve your lifestyle? Or are you becoming even more generous? Even more sacrificial as you see the needs around you grow? We face these same questions as a church. We’ve been blessed. Through careful stewardship, we’re debt free and stable financially. To whom much is given, much is expected. It’s why we’ve sent money through the Petros Network to places like Ethiopia. It’s why we’ve given funds to Bishop John Rucyahana in Rwanda as he seeks to serve the poorest of the poor. It’s why we’ve sent money to help Pastor Martin rebuild in South Sudan. It’s why we support clean water projects with Peter Halder in Bangladesh. And we’re seeking to do even more. Not just around the world but in our own backyard as well. We are about to break ground on a long-awaited youth building so we can serve Parker students and their families. We launched Douglas County Christian Counseling so we can meet the growing mental health needs among the underserved in our community. If you are looking for an opportunity to respond to God’s Word today, prayerfully consider joining us at PEPC as we seek to answer God’s call to give generously to His Kingdom work!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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May 23, 2022
A Life of Blessing

Readings for today: Psalms 111-118

I have been reading a book recently titled, “The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World.” The authors are the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu. It is essentially an interview, the last one between the two dear friends, before Archbishop Tutu died. In the book, both men agree that we create so much of our own suffering. We have this innate selfishness about us that is the root of much of our pain and frustration. We are naturally inclined to be greedy and gluttonous. We seem addicted to pleasure and give little thought to those in need around us. To put it in biblical terms, we too easily “gratify the desires of the sinful nature” which creates a negative ripple effect on the world around us. What’s the antidote to pervasive disease? Giving ourselves away to others. Compassionate concern for those who are less fortunate. Deliberately choosing to deny ourselves so that others around us might flourish. Living in radically generous ways. Being open-handed with all that we have to help those in need. Focusing on the well-being of others is the surest and truest path to joy.

The Psalmist agrees. Blessed is the one who fears the Lord. Light dawns in the darkness for the one who is upright. It goes well with the one who is generous and just. The righteous will never be moved. They will be remembered forever. They are immune to fear for they place their trust in the Lord. They are steady and non-anxious for they know their victory over this world is secure. Only the righteous person is truly free for they are not bound to the things of this world. They do not love the things of this world. They store up their treasures in heaven. This allows them to distribute freely. To walk with open hands and live with an open heart. This is the life God promises to those who will follow Him.

We live in such an anxious world. More and more people suffer from anxiety disorders and depression. They medicate with alcohol and marijuana and opioids. There is so much anger and hatred in our world. Violence is on the rise. Pain and suffering are becoming more and more unbearable. It’s heartbreaking to witness. As a pastor, I often have a front row seat as people seek my counsel. They come into my office or grab coffee with me down at Fika and they want to know why things are so hard. They want to know why life is so difficult. They want to know where God is in the midst of all they are going through. Sadly, as I listen to them share, I see the same self-centered patterns emerge. They are often the victim of their own sinful choices. They spend years ignoring God and then are surprised when life doesn’t go their way. They justify their selfish attitudes and actions. They rationalize away their sin. They don’t really want to make the changes God requires. So their suffering only deepens. If only they would turn to God! If only they would delight in His commands! God has tremendous blessings stored up for those who commit their way to Him. For those who seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness. If you want to live a life free from fear, give your life over to Christ. Love Him by obeying His commands. Put on His righteousness like a garment. Let Him cover you with His peace.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 1-2, Psalms 37, 71, 94

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May 24, 2022
Resisting Evil

Readings for today: 1 Kings 1-2, Psalms 37, 71, 94

It is easy to “fret yourself because of evildoers.” It’s easy to watch the news or scroll through social media and focus on all that is negative. All that is wrong with the world. It is easy to focus on the unrighteous and their manipulation, oppression, and greed. It is easy to give in to anger and hate. To lash out at those who perpetrate abuse and violence. There’s something deep inside all of us that longs for revenge. Longs to see those who do evil get what’s coming to them. We get frustrated when they seem to prosper. We lose heart when they get ahead. We question the justice of God when the wicked seemingly get away with all their plots and schemes.

Once again, the Psalmist gives voice to how we feel. He speaks directly to our hearts and points us to God. He helps us reframe our understanding and teaches us God’s eternal perspective. Do not be envious of those who do wrong. They will fade like the grass. Do not fret over the one who carries out evil. For they will be cut off. In the grand scheme of things, the evil only prosper for a moment but it is the righteous and the meek and the godly who will inherit the earth. Our job is not to seek revenge but to trust in the Lord and do good. Delight ourselves in God and commit ourselves to walk in His ways. If we will remain faithful, God promises to make our light shine. He promises us an eternal inheritance and the blessing of peace. He promises to uphold the righteous and never let us be put to shame. He promises to establish our steps and provide for our needs and give us a future.

This isn’t easy. Our world is growing more chaotic by the day. Evil is rising up all around us. Evil people are taking advantage of the instability to hoard power and wealth and influence. They plot against the righteous. They draw the sword. They bend the bow. Their goal is the destruction of the godly. The oppression of the poor and needy. They are a curse. They sow fear. They spread anxiety. They will stop at nothing until they achieve their sinful, selfish, unrighteous ends. But God sees them and laughs. He knows their day is coming. He will execute judgment on them and cut them off forever. So place your trust in the Lord. Make Him your stronghold in times of trouble. Seek His help. Deliverance and salvation come from His hand. Take refuge in Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 119:1-88

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May 25, 2022
Jesus is Better

Readings for today: Psalms 119:1-88

The way of Jesus is better. His ways are better than our ways. His thoughts are better than our thoughts. His wisdom is deeper. His knowledge is higher. His understanding unsearchable. He knows what is good for us. He blazed the trail of righteousness. He paved the narrow road that leads to salvation. Why in the world would we not want to follow Him? Why try to make our own way? Do we actually believe we know better than God? Are we actually so foolish as to think we can make our way in this world on our own?

Psalm 119 is a song of praise for the commandments of the Lord. It's a declaration of love for the law of God. A promise of fidelity to the ways of God. At first, it may sound strange to our ears. We who have been saved by grace tend to dismiss God's law as irrelevant to our lives. We who fear any form of works-righteousness tend to practice avoidance when it comes to God's commands. We don't want to play the Pharisee or be accused of legalism so we swing the pendulum to the other extreme and simply ignore what God has to say in His Word. The result is an impoverished life with God. An impotent life with God. A life that lacks any kind of spiritual power or vitality or lasting joy or enduring peace.

One cannot reasonably expect to experience God when we are constantly trying to avoid Him. One cannot reasonably expect to receive the blessings of God when we refuse to submit our lives to Him. One cannot reasonably expect to inherit the promises of God when we will not listen or obey Him. There is only one path to peace. There is only one way to dwell in safety and security in this world. There is only one road that leads us back to our eternal home and it is the one Jesus Himself walked for us. Jesus loved the law of God. Jesus kept His Father's commands. Jesus lived a sinless and blameless life and He said anyone who would come after Him must do the same. Anyone who would love Him must keep His commands. Friends, this isn't about earning God's favor or buying God's blessings or working to achieve our own salvation. Rather it is about trusting God. It's about submitting our lives to Him. It's about surrendering our will to His will and letting Him be our guide.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 3-4, 2 Chronicles 1, Psalms 72

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May 26, 2022
Ask and You Shall Receive

Readings for today: 1 Kings 3-4, 2 Chronicles 1, Psalm 72

“At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, "Ask what I shall give you." (1 Kings 3:5)

Put yourself in Solomon’s shoes as you read today. You have a glorious vision of God. He literally bends the heavens to come down and enter your dreams as you sleep. He says to you, “What shall I give to you?” “What is it you want?” “Tell me your heart’s desire and I will make it happen.” What would you say? How would you ask for?

Don’t let yourself respond too quickly. Take a moment. Let the Spirit search your heart as you ponder and reflect. As you think, let me encourage you to get in touch with your deepest fears. We all have them. Secret fears we harbor in our hearts that we spend a lifetime running from or protecting ourselves from. So much of how we choose to live our lives is in response to primordial fears we all carry inside. Fear of failure. Fear of not having enough. Fear of being unsafe. Fears for our children or our children’s children. Fear of insignificance. Fear of disease. Fear of death. What do you think Solomon was afraid of? As a young man, he had just inherited a powerful kingdom in the Middle East. (Not the safest or calmest place in the world, especially back then!) He was surrounded by powerful neighbors with powerful armies. He faced enemies both at home and abroad. As fabulous as his wealth was, it was fleeting in the ancient world. It could be here today and gone tomorrow. There was no FCC to guarantee his money. His people were looking to him for guidance and wisdom. What if he failed? What if he couldn’t live up to his father’s incredible legacy? All eyes turned to him as he ascended the throne. Would he be able to hold it? Would he preside over a period of peace and prosperity or would the nation crumble under his leadership? What if famines struck? What if the rains didn’t come? What if harvests failed? Plagues struck his livestock? So much responsibility at such a young age!

I imagine Solomon’s dreams were often filled with anxiety and fear. The pressure to perform had to be enormous. So when the Lord came to him with this question - “What shall I give to you?” - Solomon responds from the depths of his heart. “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?” (1 Kings 3:9) Centuries later, a man named James would encourage God’s people to pray a similar prayer. “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” (James 1:5) It’s a potent prayer. Transcending time and place and circumstance. Solomon is clearly not simply focused on the present or even the short-term. He knows the challenges he will face. He knows the years will weigh heavy. He knows there will be trials and tribulations and struggles and heartache. He knows all of this and so he asks for divine wisdom to make good decisions for the sake of God’s people. How selfless! How humble! How insightful!

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus teaches His disciples, saying, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” (Matthew 7:7) Isn’t that amazing? Essentially, Jesus is asking his disciples the same question He once asked Solomon. What is it you want? Ask and I will give it to you! Seek it out and I will show it to you! Be persistent in prayer and I will open the door for you. I will let you into my presence. I will answer all your questions. I will meet all your needs. I will give you what your heart desires.

Wait a minute, you say! That cannot be true! We've all prayed lots of prayers that were never answered! We've all prayed lots of prayers that just seemed to bounce off the ceiling! We've all prayed lots of prayers and gotten the silent treatment - so we thought - from the Lord. So what's really going on here? What's Jesus really saying?

Jesus is no genie. We are not given a magic lamp. Expressing to God our deepest desires and deepest needs is not the same as making three wishes! God probes the deepest recesses of our hearts. Psalm 42:7 describes it like this, "Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me." The Apostle Paul says it like this in Romans 8:26-27, "For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." This is why Paul can say with confidence that God works all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose! Because God responds to the deepest needs of the human heart. The needs we can't give voice to. The needs we don't want to admit to. The needs are most afraid to express.

The most amazing thing about Solomon is that he's in touch with his needs. He knows he is weak. He knows he is young. He knows he is immature. He knows he is unable to carry the burden that has been placed on his shoulders. He acknowledges all of this and his prayer therefore comes from that deep place within as he asks for divine wisdom to bear up under the challenges that will come. Are you in touch with your deepest needs? Have you spent time reflecting on your fears? Have you come face to face with your failures? Do you acknowledge your weakness and insignificance and are you willing to bring it before God? This, friends, is prayer. Humble. Heartfelt. Authentic. Real. Honest to goodness prayer. And such prayers God will never dismiss or despise!

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 119:89-176

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May 27, 2022
Wisdom vs. Foolishness

Readings for today: Psalms 119:89-176

A few years ago I read a book that helped me parse the difference between wisdom and foolishness. Wisdom, according to the author, is when we see the truth and adjust our lives accordingly. Foolishness, on the other hand, is when we demand that truth adjust to our reality. To put it another way, wise people will meet the demands of life while foolish people will demand that life meet their demands. Wise people receive feedback when it is given. They own their own performance, mistakes, and issues and take responsibility without externalizing blame or giving excuses. Foolish people become defensive very quickly when confronted. They refuse to own their own shortcomings and often externalize by blaming those around them. Wise people listen. Fools dismiss or ignore.

Are you a wise person or a fool? How do you know? Well, how do you feel as you read the words from Psalm 119? What happens internally when you consider the demands of God's Law? Are you the kind of person who embraces God's commandments, however imperfectly? Are they your delight? Do you find yourself seeking to bend your life in submission to what God has revealed in His Word? Or are you the kind of person who resists God's laws? Dismisses them? Ignores them? Rationalizes away your sin? When you read or engage God's Word, do you seek to bend it to your will? Your life? Your desires? Or do you seek to submit your life to Him? Are you a wise person or a fool?

The Psalmist is clearly wise...

"I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life..."

"Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day..."

"How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"

"Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way."

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

"Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart."

"The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever."

(Psalms 119:93, 97, 103-105, 111, 160)

The Psalmist loves God's Word. Loves God's Law. Loves God's commands. The Psalmist seeks to do all he can to adjust his life to God's Will. To live his life under God's sovereign rule and authority. He makes no excuses for his sin. He doesn't hide his shortcomings. He faces his failures honestly and transparently.

Sadly, so many in our culture today are fools. Even more tragically, they sit in our pews and attend our worship services. As the Apostle Paul says in Romans 10:2, they have a "zeal for God but not according to knowledge." They love God but not in the way He deserves or demands. Instead, they "do what is right in their own eyes." They bend God's truth to their reality. They seek to make God's Word

null and void either through outright rejection or simple ignorance. They refuse to submit their lives to His will. As a result, they live lives of quiet desperation. They are not evil people. They do not have bad intentions. They simply are misguided. As Paul says in Romans 1, “Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools...” (Romans 1:21-22)

Let me be the first to say this all too often describes me! On some level. At certain seasons. In particular circumstances throughout the course of my life, I have tried to bend God’s will to my own. I have tried to rationalize away my sin. I have tried to make twist and turn God’s Law to make it fit my life. To no avail. I have thrown myself against the will of God so many times until I finally broke. Finally surrendered. And with that surrender has come wisdom. Not perfection. Wisdom. Self-knowledge. Self-understanding. Seeing myself for who I truly am, warts and all. And learning to trust God’s ways above my ways. God’s thoughts more than my thoughts. God’s will more than my feelings. This is what it means to be wise, friends. The fear of the Lord truly is the beginning of wisdom!

Readings for tomorrow: Song of Solomon 1:1-5:1

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May 28, 2022
Sex and God

Readings for today: Song of Solomon 1:1-5:1

The Song of Solomon is one of the most difficult and least understood books in all of Scripture. It's one we tend to avoid in our sex-saturated culture. The language is far too intimate. The imagery too graphic. We won't let ourselves picture it much less reflect on how the Spirit might speak to us through it. We flip through the pages as fast as we can to get to the end so we can avoid any embarrassment.

But what is the book about? The love of a man for a woman? The love of God for His church? Perhaps both? Are we comfortable thinking about our relationship with God in sexual terms? Or is that a bridge too far? I firmly believe the Bible is inviting us to approach God in the most intimate of ways. The language of the Song is meant to arouse. Meant to touch the deepest places of our hearts. Meant to draw us into intimate embrace with the Father.

Our inability to embrace this book only reveals how corrupt our understanding of human sexuality has become. We see it as dirty yet pleasurable. Something to be enjoyed and yet something to be feared. Our culture boasts of sexual freedom and yet is shocked when such unfettered freedom leads to abuse and violence. If there's anything the #MeToo movement has taught us is that our sexual appetites are almost impossible to satisfy. Sexuality without restraint is actually destructive and traumatic.

And yet, sex is God's creation. Sexuality is something He instilled within each of us. We are created as sexual beings and when the Bible talks about "knowing" another person, it often uses the most sexually intimate of terms. The same is true for "knowing" God. God designed sex to be the ultimate experience of "knowing." A way for us to express our deepest affections. Our deepest emotions. Our deepest vulnerabilities. All within the safety of the covenant bonds of marriage between a man and a woman. All within the safety of the covenant bond we share with Jesus.

So is it possible to see the Song of Solomon as a prayer? As a way to express the deepest desires of our hearts to God? As a way for us to ask for deeper intimacy with Him? Or does our broken human experience of sexuality warp our thinking? Corrupt how we understand this most powerful and primal of drives? Does it poison this well and thus prevent us from fully grasping the depth of relationship God desires to have with us? There's a reason Christ calls the church His "bride." There's a reason God so often refers to Himself in the Old Testament as a "husband" and Israel as his "wife." Marriage is the place where a man and a woman become "one flesh" before the Lord and it is designed to point beyond itself to something even greater...the "oneness" God desires to have with His people for all eternity.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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May 30, 2022
Desperate for God

Readings for today: Song of Solomon 5:2-7:13, 8:14, Psalms 45

Two Fridays ago, I helped lead a commissioning service for 330 church planters in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia. These men and women are headed out to three different regions of their country where they will preach the gospel and plant churches in unreached villages. They know they will face significant persecution. Their lives will be threatened. They will endure incredible hardship and poverty. Some of them will even give their lives for the sake of the Kingdom of God. And yet, as we prayed over them, they wept at the privilege of being counted worthy to share in the sufferings of Christ. As each group returned to their seats after the prayer time, they burst out in spontaneous, joyous singing. Their hearts are pure so I know they will see God. They hunger and thirst for righteousness so I know the Spirit will fill them. They will be persecuted for righteousness' sake so I know they will inherit the kingdom of heaven.

What is the secret to such deep and abiding faith? Desperation for God. These men and women exhibit a devotion to God that is awe-inspiring. They have nothing and yet have everything. Everyday is filled with hardship, suffering, and pain and yet they keep their eyes on Jesus. The challenges they face are enormous and overwhelming and yet they trust God is on their side. It's incredible. It reminds me of the desperation we read about in today's reading out of the Song of Solomon. The woman searching the streets at night for her beloved. She too endured beatings and bruising. She too endured suffering and shame. And yet should could not get the vision of her beloved out of her mind or off her heart.

“My beloved is radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand. His head is the finest gold; his locks are wavy, black as a raven. His eyes are like doves besides streams of water, bathed in milk, sitting beside a full pool. His cheeks are like beds of spices, mounds of sweet-smelling herbs. His lips are lilies, dripping liquid myrrh. His arms are rods of gold, set with jewels. His body is polished ivory, bedecked with sapphires. His legs are alabaster columns, set on bases of gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as the cedars. His mouth is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable. This is my beloved and this is my friend...” (Song of Solomon 5:10-16)

Is this your vision of God? Is this how you see and understand your beautiful Savior, Jesus Christ? Does the vision of Jesus fire your devotion? Capture your attention? Fill your dreams? Is He your supreme treasure? Is He your most precious thought? Do you consider your relationship with Him to be the most special in your life? Is it hard to wait to spend time with Him? Do you find yourself longing for worship each week? Does serving Him bring you great joy? Are you excited to share Him with others? A lot depends on how you answer these questions. If your answer is “yes” to them all, praise God! Your life is marked by a desperation for Jesus that only He can fill and the great news of the gospel is that He will indeed satisfy every longing of your heart! If your answer is “no” or “I don't know” or “I'm not sure”, then I encourage you to turn to prayer. Fall on your knees before the One who loves you most and ask Him to give you a deeper hunger and a greater thirst for righteousness. Confess those things that distract you or draw your attention away from Christ. Lay them at His feet. Empty yourself of anything that would compete for your love for Jesus and let Him fill you with His grace in return.

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 1-4

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May 31, 2022
Living with Wisdom

Readings for today: [Proverbs 1-4](#)

Our world suffers from an acute lack of wisdom. Where wisdom is lacking, there can be no righteousness. No justice. No equity. No understanding. No discretion. No learning. No guidance. Instead, we are like a rudderless ship on the ocean. Completely at the mercy of the wind and waves. We are like a hiker in the wilderness without a compass. Lost and aimlessly wandering. We are like a plane flying through a deep fog with no guidance system. We have no idea if we are right side up or upside down. The results are devastating. A dramatic rise in anxiety and fear, violence and suffering, hate and outrage. We are like a raw nerve, lashing out at anything and everything that touches us.

The Bible is clear. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. If we want wisdom and insight and knowledge and understanding, we must turn to the Lord. Only God can teach us the meaning of righteousness and justice and equity. Only God can bring about peace and rest and satisfaction and fulfillment. Only God can save us from our sin. The harsh reality is we are our own worst enemy. We create so much of our own suffering. We are prone to violence. We are vulnerable to greed. We run towards evil. We selfishly pursue our own ends.

And yet wisdom still cries aloud in the streets! She raises her voice in the public square. She preaches at the gates of the city. Constantly calling us to repent. Calling us to humble ourselves before God. Calling us to fear the Lord. Those who turn aside to listen soon find themselves filled with the Holy Spirit. They find comfort for their anxious hearts. They find rest for their weary souls. This is the promise of God for those who will return to Him. If we receive God's Word and treasure His commands, we will dwell secure. We will walk in God's favor. We will be blessed beyond all measure.

Friends, God is generous. He gives wisdom to all who would ask, holding nothing back. He makes Himself a shield to the upright. He guards them as they walk the paths of justice. He watches over the ways of His saints. He is with them in the valley of the shadow. He prepares a feast for them in the presence of even their fiercest enemies. He makes their cup to overflow. This is what God wants for your life if you will simply commit your way to Him!

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 5-8

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