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August 1, 2022
Freedom Comes With Responsibility

Readings for today: Isaiah 59-63

I have a running dialogue with a couple of friends who are atheists. Their questions are honest and real and sincere. They struggle with all the suffering they see in the world and they wonder how in the world God could stand by and let it happen. They question his goodness. They question his omnipotence. After all, how could a good God allow things like mass starvation and genocide? How could an all-powerful God not confront Putin and put an end to warfare and violence. Perhaps God is all-powerful but not good and therefore not to be trusted? Perhaps God is good but impotent in the face of evil and therefore unreliable? Either way, he's not much of a god and unworthy of our attention much less our worship and devotion.

The factor my friends fail to take into account is human freedom. When God created us, He made us in His image. He gave us dominion and authority over all He had made. He gave us the freedom to choose so that we would have the freedom to love. Love the world He has made. Love our fellow human beings. Love God. The freedom to choose means we have to accept responsibility for the consequences of our choices. Good or bad. Righteous or unrighteous. When we choose selfishness, greed, power, deceit, violence, and hate; we shouldn't be surprised when we reap a similar harvest in return. When we choose sacrifice, honor, love, grace, and mercy; we shouldn't be surprised when we reap those things as well. What is true for us as individuals is also true for us collectively as nations and it's why the world we live in is in such turmoil.

Isaiah saw all take place in his own day. He also could see it continuing to happen far into the future. Read his words again from Isaiah 59:1-13. They are convicting and sobering. The prophet lays out exactly why there is so much evil and suffering in the world. He pins all the responsibility on humanity's failure to love and obey God. "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. For your hands are defiled with blood and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies; your tongue mutters wickedness. No one enters suit justly; no one goes to law honestly; they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies, they conceive mischief and give birth to iniquity. They hatch adders' eggs; they weave the spider's web; he who eats their eggs dies, and from one that is crushed a viper is hatched. Their webs will not serve as clothing; men will not cover themselves with what they make. Their works are works of iniquity, and deeds of violence are in their hands. Their feet run to evil, and they are swift to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; desolation and destruction are in their highways. The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths; they have made their roads crooked; no one who treads on them knows peace. Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not overtake us; we hope for light, and behold, darkness, and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope for the wall like the blind; we grope like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among those in full vigor we are like dead men. We all growl like bears; we moan and moan like doves; we hope for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us. For our transgressions are multiplied before you, and our sins testify against us; for our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities: transgressing, and denying the Lord, and turning back from following our God, speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the heart lying words."

The fundamental reality is that God has given humanity all she needs to put an end to evil and suffering in our world. The earth produces more than enough food to make sure everyone single person gets fed.

World economies produce more than enough wealth to provide for the basic needs of every single person on the planet. Medical technology could easily bring an end to so much disease. Justice and righteousness are within our grasp if we can just look beyond class and race and gender. So why don't we do these things? The Bible's answer is clear though we may not like it. We are sinners. At a fundamental level, we are selfish. We look out for number one. We want what we want when we want it and we give too little thought to those around us. We believe we are the center of the universe and our needs are what are most important. Satisfying our desires is our highest priority. And the consequences to such an approach to life are evident all around us. It's why some have much and others have little. It's why some get ahead and some are left behind. It's why there is so much inequality among individuals and nations. We refuse to answer the call for which we were made...to be our brother and sister's keeper.

Thankfully, the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save nor His ear dull that He cannot hear. Though He has entrusted the world to us, He is not dependent on us. Though He has entrusted us with the welfare of our neighbor, He doesn't wait for us to act. Though He has given us dominion and authority over all things, He still reigns supreme. So in His time and in His way, He takes action. He sends a Redeemer. His name is Jesus. Listen to how Isaiah describes Him... "Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey. The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him. He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak. According to their deeds, so will he repay, wrath to his adversaries, repayment to his enemies; to the coastlands he will render repayment. So they shall fear the name of the Lord from the west, and his glory from the rising of the sun; for he will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of the Lord drives. "And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression," declares the Lord." (Isaiah 59:15-20)

Jesus sets us free from the power of sin and death. Jesus sets us free to love and serve others. Jesus sets us free to move from selfishness to selflessness. From greed to generosity. From hatred to compassion. From violence to peace. And those who follow Jesus are sent out into the world to "bring good news to the poor" and "bind up the broken-hearted" and "proclaim liberty to the captives" and the "year of the Lord's favor." (Isaiah 61) This is our responsibility as believers in Jesus Christ, friends, and it is why the church is the hope of the world.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 64-66

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August 2, 2022
Potter's Hand

Readings for today: Isaiah 64-66

Over the years, I've had the blessing of spending time with incredible men and women of faith from all over the world. House church pastors in China. Leaders of an underground railroad for North Korean refugees. Survivors of the Killing Fields in Cambodia. Church planters in Ethiopia, Uganda, and South Sudan. Foster parents in America. Military men and women who've seen and experienced the horrors of war. Police officers and fire fighters who come face to face with human suffering every single day. Single moms working multiple jobs to provide for their children. Older men and women serving as primary care-givers for their spouses with terminal illnesses. Inmates who find ways to love others in the midst of an often violent prison system. In each and every case, the challenges these dear friends face are overwhelming. The pain they experience is real. Frustration can often get the best of them. Sometimes they even despair. They ask God a lot of questions. "Why have you done this to me?" "Why are you letting this happen to me?" "Where are you in the midst of all I am suffering?" These questions are honest and real. The emotions raw and unfiltered. And there are no easy answers.

Isaiah grappled with similar questions in his own time. "Be not so terribly angry, O Lord, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people. Your holy cities have become a wilderness; Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins. Will you restrain yourself at these things, O Lord? Will you keep silent, and afflict us so terribly?" (Isaiah 64:9-12) He could see the coming judgment. He could see Jerusalem and the Promised Land laid waste. Everything he held dear would be lost. His entire way of life destroyed. One might think this would cause Isaiah to despair. To lose faith in God. But in the midst of his suffering and doubting and questioning, Isaiah hits upon a key insight. One that sustains him through the pain. "But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." (Isaiah 64:8)

God never promises life will be easy. In fact, He tells us quite clearly throughout the Scriptures that life in this world will be hard. There will be pain. There will be suffering. We live in a broken world. A world that is not as it should be. A world that is not how God intended it would be. It is a world of our own making. A world ravaged by sin and death. A world we created because we wanted to be like God. A world we continue to create because we still fall for the same lie over and over again. Yes, God never promises us an easy life but He does promise He will use all things - even our pain - for our good. He is the Potter. We are the clay. The clay doesn't ask the Potter, "Why have you made me like this?" The clay doesn't question the Potter's plans for it's life. The clay doesn't worry because the Potter knows what He's doing. He is shaping us for His own glory.

It's an ancient insight that still holds true today. It holds true for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord. No matter where you live. No matter what you do. No matter what your circumstances may be. God is the master potter. We are his clay. He has us right where He wants us...on His wheel...and He is shaping us to serve His purposes in this world. We have no need to ask Him, "Why?" No need to question His plans. We simply are called to trust and obey. To let the Potter do what the Potter does best. What is the Potter doing in your life today? How is He shaping you? How is He forming you? Where is He at work in you? Give Him thanks no matter what season you find yourself in.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 21, 2 Chronicles 33

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August 3, 2022
Leadership Impact

Readings for today: 2 Kings 21, 2 Chronicles 33

All of us are leaders. Leadership begins with self. Learning to control our thoughts and desires and channel them to godly action. Leadership continues in the family. We lead our families as fathers and mothers and teach our children to walk in God's ways. We lead at work as we use our influence - whether supervisor or employee - to impact the health and well-being of others and our organization's future. We lead at church by the way we worship and serve our brothers and sisters in Christ. We lead in every sphere of life so here's the critical question...what kind of leader are you? When the final analysis is in and the impact of your life is measured, will it be for good or for evil in the eyes of the Lord?

Manasseh reigned for over fifty years and in that time, "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel." (2 Kings 21:2) He reinstated pagan idol worship, rebuilding the high places his father had torn down. He defiled the Temple by setting up altars to foreign gods. "He burned his sons as an offering in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, and used fortune-telling and omens and sorcery, and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger." (2 Chronicles 33:6) In short, he did more evil in his reign than all the kings who had come before him and after he died, his son Ammon continued in his ways. It was the darkest period in the southern kingdom's history. The people were led astray and the nation would perish as a result. Everything rises and falls on leadership.

In 1994, an unholy alliance between the racist government of Juvenal Habyarimana and the "Hutu Power" promoting media run by Hassan Ngeze combined to create the conditions whereby a horrific genocide became possible. In all, the genocide claimed the lives of over 1.1 million people. Most of them were killed by friends, neighbors, even family members. A national trauma survey by UNICEF estimates that 80% of Rwandan children experienced a death in their family in 1994. 70% witnessed someone being killed or injured and 90% believed they would die. The Habyarimana government, aided and abetted by the French who supplied them arms and training, worked hard to gain control over the country as they prepared to implement their own version of Hitler's "Final Solution." As the international community turned their backs on Rwanda, evil was allowed to flourish and the results were beyond tragic. Everything rises and falls on leadership.

Paul Kagame could see what was happening in his country. He saw the signs of genocide and he organized a resistance. He led a rebellion against a racist government and a racist national media and, as a result, potentially saved hundreds of thousands of lives. He is rightfully called a hero. But his leadership didn't stop there. He has worked hard to reintegrate the country. Establishing Unity and Reconciliation commissions where wrongs can be redressed, crimes confessed, forgiveness offered, and entire communities restored. This is perhaps his greatest accomplishment. Like Nelson Mandela before him, he refuses to allow hate to drive his leadership and his nation is reaping the benefits. (Of course, no leader is perfect. President Kagame's intolerance for political opposition is a dark stain on an otherwise exemplary record.) Everything rises and falls on leadership.

How are you leading in your life today?

Readings for tomorrow: Nahum 1-3

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August 4, 2022
The Honor of God

Readings for today: Nahum 1-3

Some things you can't unsee. Like the time I ran my first Bolder Boulder several years ago and saw the male belly dancers around mile four! :-)) On a more serious note, now that I've become aware of the "honor/shame" dynamic running through all of Scripture, it seems like it's everywhere. Why does God judge Nineveh with such harshness? Why is He not just content to have the victory but goes further, grinding them into dust? Why does He put their nation to open shame? Lifting their skirts. Exposing their nakedness. Demonstrating before the whole world their powerlessness? Why does He go as far as to throw excrement at them and make them a spectacle? Because God is a jealous God. Jealous for His honor. Jealous for His glory. Jealous for His name.

The nation of Assyria has enjoyed their time in the sun. Their chariots have rolled all over the Middle East like an ancient blitzkrieg. Their empire is great. Their power limitless. Their military without equal. But they've grown proud. They've exceeded the limits God set for them. They've become drunk with their success. Though they served as the rod of God's anger against the northern kingdom of Israel, He must now bring them to heel. He must again demonstrate His sovereignty over all the nations of the earth. Remember the words of the Assyrian commander to King Hezekiah when they besieged Jerusalem? How they dared to compare Almighty God with the small tribal gods of the pagan nations? It's worth going back and re-reading the story from 2 Kings 18 again. Such disdain and disrespect draws God's ire. Not because it hurts His ego but because it offends His sacred and holy honor. God will not be mocked! The Creator will not allow His creatures to treat Him this way. They will learn to honor God. They will learn to respect God. They will learn to submit to God. He will bring them to their knees one way or the other because there is one thing God cares about more than the creatures He made in His own image and that is Himself. His glory. His honor. His fame. It is His will to make His name will be great upon the earth!

"The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither; the bloom of Lebanon withers. The mountains quake before him; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it. Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him." (Nahum 1:2-6) Assyria will learn this lesson in spades. As will the other nations who dare defy the Living God. But what about God's people? What is our response to this God? How should we approach this God? With fear and trembling? On some level, yes. With humility and submission? Certainly. With terror and dread? Absolutely not! Why? Because our God is also good. And He loves His people. He is faithful to His people. "The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him." (Nahum 1:7)

So here's the million dollar question from today's reading...are you living a life of humble submission before the Lord? Is God an ever-present reality in your life or does He seem distant? Someone to call on in case of emergency? Do you seek to love God with all your heart or are you apathetic towards His commandments? What about His honor and glory? Do these things cross your mind when you work? When you parent? When you're among friends? When you relate to your husband or wife? Is your worship focused on praising God or are you more concerned with your personal preferences? These are critical questions, friends, in light of what Nahum shares with us today.

Readings for tomorrow: Zephaniah 1-3

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August 5, 2022
God's Vision for the Nations

Readings for today: Zephaniah 1-3

I was asked recently what I loved most about God. Not an easy question to answer! There is so much I love about God but if I had to choose perhaps what I love most is His heart for the nations. God loves humanity. God loves every human being who has ever been conceived on the face of the earth. God loves every tribe and tongue and nation. God loves every culture and language and ethnicity. God loves every people group. God loves young and old. Rich and poor. Able and disabled. And His great desire is to get to know each and every one on a deep, intimate, personal level.

So often when we think of the Great Commission, we think of Matthew 28. But did you know there is a Great Commission in every single gospel? Did you know the Great Commission often shows up in the Old Testament as well? Consider the words of Zephaniah from today's reading... "For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord." (Zephaniah 3:9) I imagine the people listening would have immediately thought back to the Tower of Babel. The place where God came down and confused the languages of the earth. The place where God judged the people of the earth for not fulfilling His Great Commission to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. Zephaniah points them forward to a day when God will reverse the curse. The people will come together in unity to call on the name of the Lord and serve Him with one accord. This is exactly what happens at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit is poured out and everyone hears the gospel preached in their own languages. The early church called on the name of the Lord and were saved. They served God with one accord, holding all things in common. They had great favor as a result with all the people and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

This is what God wants to do in and through His church today. So how does that happen? We open ourselves up to God. We surrender to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. We draw near to God in repentance and He then draws near to us. How will we know when He is near? Listen to how Zephaniah describes it... "The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach. Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes," says the Lord." (Zephaniah 3:17-20) Friends, these are the signs God has drawn near. Joy. Gladness. Peace. Love. Loud singing. Comfort for those who mourn. Freedom for the oppressed. Healing for the lame. Inclusion for the outcast. Reversal of reputation for those who've been put to shame for His name sake. God makes Himself known in the gathering of His people. God makes Himself known among all the peoples and all the nations of the earth. God makes Himself known in favor and blessing. How is God making Himself known to you in your life today?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 22-23, 2 Chronicles 34-35

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August 6, 2022
Life isn't Fair

Readings for today: 2 Kings 22-23, 2 Chronicles 34-35

“Whoever said life was fair?” If I only had a nickel for every time I heard that phrase growing up! As the oldest of three boys, I often complained that I had to do more work than my brothers. I had to be more responsible than my brothers. More was expected of me than my brothers. In reality, I don't actually think this was true but that's how it appeared to me when I was young. Then I had my own kids. Four of them. As they grew up, we started assigning them chores around the house. They too would complain from time to time. Guess what words came out of my mouth? “Whoever said life was fair?” :-)

One of the more difficult things about reading and reflecting on Scripture from a Western perspective is this principle of “fairness.” We live in a democracy which - at least in theory - is built on the assumption that everyone has equal. Everyone has equal opportunity. Everyone gets the same chances in life. We all know this is a myth but that doesn't stop us from believing it and it becomes a “lens” through which we read Scripture. Fundamentally, we believe deep down in our hearts that God's law, God's grace, God's justice, God's mercy must apply equally to all people at all times. In essence, everyone gets a chance or God is unfair.

But then we read about King Josiah. A man so faithful to God that he's described as the greatest king since David. His heart was pure. He did not turn aside to the right or to the left. He walked in the ways of the Lord. He tore down the altars his father had built. He purged Israel of their idolatry. He reinstated the Passover to such a degree that nothing like it had happened since the days of Samuel the prophet. Josiah rebuilt the Temple. He fulfilled the prophecy given to Jeroboam, destroying the shrines he had built that had ensnared the northern kingdom of Israel, leading to her destruction. One would think Josiah's faithfulness would stem the coming disaster. One would think God would judge him on his merits alone. One would think his faithfulness would be rewarded with long life and happiness and peace. Such was not the case.

Judah had reached the point of no return. God's judgment was on its way. There was no turning back. The sins of the fathers and grandfathers going back generations would now be visited on their descendents. Josiah's faithfulness didn't matter. It wasn't enough to turn back the tide. So Josiah goes to war and rather than rewarding his faithfulness with a great victory - as God had done in ages past - Josiah is mortally wounded and dies. His reign of faithfulness comes to a tragic end. The people wail. Their grief is real. The great prophet Jeremiah himself appears in our text, lifting up a lament. And to our eyes it appears God moved the goalposts. God is unfair. After all, did not Josiah do all God had asked? Did not Josiah stay true to God's commands? Did not Josiah walk in God's ways? Why did revival not come? Why didn't God give him a chance? Why didn't God restore Israel like he had done before?

Sin has consequences. Not just for our lives but for the lives of our children and children's children as well. There is a cumulative effect to sin. It builds over time. With each passing generation, injustices are heaped upon injustice. Death doesn't reset the deck. The passing of a generation doesn't restart the clock. The debt is passed on. The weight of sin only gets more heavy and eventually becomes a burden too great to bear. God is just. God is righteous. He will not let sin go unchecked. He will not let evil go unpunished. So by the time we get to Josiah, the die has been cast. God's wrath is already engaged. His judgment is on its way in the form of the Babylonian Empire. The line of David will be cut off. The

city of David destroyed. The Temple razed to the ground. God's people will go into exile. This is God's will and though it might not seem fair to our Western eyes, it is just and righteous.

At this point you may be thinking, "What hope do I have?" When will I feel the weight of God's righteous wrath and judgment? Should I be living in fear of the day when God's punishment will come and I will lose all that I have? Hear the good news of the gospel. Jesus Christ bore the full weight of human sin! All the sin that had piled up generation after generation - not just from our past but also from our future - was laid on his shoulders. On the cross, the Father poured out the full measure of His righteous wrath and judgment on the Son. Jesus truly paid it all. His blood satisfied the just demands of God's Law. Jesus was cut off. Jesus' body was destroyed. His soul went into exile in hell. But the Righteous One would not stay in the grave! On the third day, He rose again! And through His death and resurrection we have been set free. This was God's plan from eternity. To balance the scales of justice. To right every wrong. To level the playing field by sending His Only Beloved Son to die in our place. Rejoice, friends, God has done for you what you could not do for yourself! He has paid the penalty for your sin and granted you salvation!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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August 8, 2022
How Long, O Lord?

Readings for today: Habakkuk 1-3

It's the heart cry of God's people. Ever since the Fall of Adam and Eve, we've been crying out to God. How long will you wait? How long will you tarry? How long until sin and evil and death are finally and completely destroyed? We look around us and we see the wicked prosper. We see evil flourish. We see those who commit violence and injustice and oppression get ahead. We don't understand. Why do bad things happen to good people? How can a good God allow such evil and suffering? Why doesn't God do something about all that is wrong in the world?

The thing I love most about the Bible is it doesn't shy away from these hard, honest questions. The prophet Habakkuk asks some of these same questions in our passage today. "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted." (Habakkuk 1:2-4) Remember, Habakkuk is prophesying sometime after the death of Josiah. He has witnessed one of the most righteous kings in Israel's history die at the hands of a pagan king. He can't wrap his mind around how God could ever allow such a thing. Josiah did everything God asked. Josiah was righteous and good and noble and true. His death was the final blow for God's people. The wages of sin are now beginning to be paid. Destruction and violence and strife and contention are all on the rise while God seems to stand idly by. The Law is paralyzed. It cannot save. Justice is stymied. It never goes forth. The wicked surround the righteous. There can be no hope.

How does God respond? He's honest with His beloved prophet. "Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own. They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves." (Habakkuk 1:5-7) God is using the Babylonians to accomplish His divine purposes. He raises them up in order to bring the nations low. Like the Assyrians before them, they will become the rod of God's righteous judgment on His people. Habakkuk cannot believe what he hears. "Are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?...Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever?" (Habakkuk 1:12-13, 17) Habakkuk is full of fear for his people. He can see how merciless the Babylonian horde will be. The violence will not stop. The killing will not end. The suffering will be overwhelming.

Once again, the Lord answers. "And the Lord answered me: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay. Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith...For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea...But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him." (Habakkuk 2:2-4, 14, 20) God does not count time as we do. His vision is pure. His timing is perfect. He is on the move. If His salvation seems slow, we are to wait. If His deliverance seems delayed, we are to have faith. Indeed, the righteous shall live by faith. Just as

Abraham waited for the fulfillment of God's promise so must we and the good news is that God meets us in the waiting. He speaks to us in the waiting. He ministers to us in the waiting if we will but turn to Him. What is God waiting for, you might ask? He is waiting for His purpose to be fulfilled. And what is His purpose? To fill the earth with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. To call the earth to silence and awe and reverence and worship before Him as He indwells His holy Temple.

Habakkuk hears God's heart in these words and his despair turns to faith. "O Lord, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O Lord, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy... Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places." (Habakkuk 3:2, 17-19) Habakkuk walks by faith not by sight. He may not live to see the deliverance of the Lord but he believes it. Trusts it. Rejoices in it. This is our call as well. No matter where you may find yourself in life. No matter the challenges you may face. No matter the hardship you may endure. God is already on His way to save. Already on His way to deliver. Already on His way to lift you out of the pit and miry clay and give you a new song to sing. Trust Him! Believe Him! Have faith in Him! Rejoice in your coming salvation!

Readings for tomorrow: Joel 1-3

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August 9, 2022
Faith over Fear

Readings for today: Joel 1-3

This morning a good friend of mine shared with me his anxiety over the world his children are growing up in. He told me he and his wife watched the news for the first time the other day and were simply overwhelmed by what they saw. Violence. Disease. Pain. Suffering. It made him sick to his stomach. He asked me if I thought it was God's judgment and if we should be afraid. It's an honest question. I told him I have some of the same concerns and anxieties and fears. I look around the world today and see everything that's happening and I grieve. I made a commitment this year to read both the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal on a daily basis and often feel like I'm on information overload. Very little of it is good.

I think the prophet Joel must have felt the same. "What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten. What the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten." (Joel 1:4) Plague after plague. Defeat after defeat. The national economy crashed. An entire way of life destroyed. It had to be so depressing for him and yet what was his response? A call to faith over fear. "Consecrate a fast; call a worship assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord." (Joel 1:14) Joel is on to something important here. Any time we experience anxiety and fear, we have a choice to make. We can wallow in it. We can try to medicate it. We can attempt to dismiss it or ignore it. Or we can respond by taking it to God. Falling on our faces before Him. Humbling ourselves and crying out to Him for help.

After all, has not the Lord showed us His mercy? Is not our God a God of compassion? Forgiving those who love Him to the thousandth generation? Joel places his faith in God and God responds - as He always does - by renewing His covenant promise. "Yet even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and He relents over disaster." (Joel 2:12-13) God is jealous for His people. God loves the place where He has set His name. So even in times of national disaster, we look to the Lord. "Fear not, O land; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things!" God has done great things for His people throughout history and He will continue to do great things in and through them if they will but turn to Him.

One of my favorite Scriptures in the entire Bible comes from Joel 2:25, "I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you." I have experienced this restoration firsthand. Thirteen years ago, my life was in shambles. Neglect had almost cost me my marriage. Anger had almost cost me my children. Mistakes made by me and others had blown up my career. I was out of options. In desperation I turned to the Lord. For months, I spent my nights pacing back and forth for hours in prayer. I barely got any sleep. The darkness in my life only seemed to get deeper. My anxieties and fears paralyzed me. I hit rock bottom. The "locusts" God had sent into my life stripped me down to the studs. And who did I find waiting there for me? Jesus. He walked with me in the ruins of my life. He ministered to my wounds. He calmed my fears. He slowly but surely restored me to health again. The last thirteen years have been like a dream. All because I returned to the Lord with all my heart.

Perhaps you feel a lot like my friend. Perhaps you look at the news or what's happening in the world and you have deep concerns. Anxieties and fears for those you love. You wonder where to find hope. Return to God! Humble yourself before Him. Fast and pray. Rend your heart and give the Lord your whole heart. Let Him renew and restore you as He has promised.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 1-4

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August 10, 2022
Godly Courage

Readings for today: Jeremiah 1-4

We've been preaching through a challenging series this summer at the church I serve. It's called "No Easy Answers" and we've been attempting to apply Biblical truth to some of the most complex issues of our day. Issues like truth, life, ethnicity, immigration, refugees, politics, marriage, family, and sexuality. It's been difficult to say the least. We've received nasty emails. Some people have left our church. Some remain and foster all sorts of division. I've been accused of being both "woke" and a "bigot." Some weeks I get called a "leftist progressive" and other weeks a "far right conservative." Some of the criticism has turned to personal attack. Some of it has spilled over onto my own family. On the positive side, I have had many, many more people complement us on our courage. We've had many new people start attending who have expressed thanks for being a church willing to take on hard subjects. Just this past week, a young woman who's been struggling in her faith for years made the decision to return because of how we were "holding space" for those with doubts and questions. It was so encouraging to hear her story.

Jeremiah was a man called to preach in one of the most difficult seasons in Israel's history. He was watching the end of an era. The twilight of a nation. His people had abandoned their faith. They no longer trusted in God or obeyed His Word. They ignored His Law and God's judgment was on the way. Their hearts were hard. Their eyes were blind. Their ears could no longer hear. And yet Jeremiah was called to preach. It took great courage. It took great perseverance. He would be mocked, beaten, and persecuted. People would seek his death. I've often wondered where he found the strength. Then I read these words from the opening chapter, "Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord." Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." (Jeremiah 1:4-10) Jeremiah's confidence comes from the Lord. He trusts the call God has placed on his life. It's an inner strength he was born with. Something God instilled in him in the womb. To abandon this call would be to abandon himself which is something Jeremiah simply cannot do.

I have to admit I feel much the same way. I actually don't feel like it takes much courage to preach what I preach. I simply say what God has called me to say. Frankly, I think it would take more courage to keep my mouth shut. To not preach God's Word. To substitute something more popular, less threatening, or to play to the crowd. Such an idea scares me to death because I know the Lord will hold me accountable for the way I lead His people. "But you, dress yourself for work; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them." (Jeremiah 1:17) Ultimately, however, it is not fear that drives me but love. I long for God's people to return to Him with all their hearts. I long for God's people to listen to His Word and obey His commands. I long for them to know the blessing of God in their lives. This is my heart and I know it's God's heart as well. "And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding." (Jeremiah 3:15) This is my calling. To be a faithful shepherd. A shepherd who loves God so much, he is willing to endure whatever conflict may come. I want to be a shepherd who feeds God's sheep with knowledge and understanding. Wisdom that is not of this world. This is my calling. This is my prayer. This is my hope. May the Lord find me faithful.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 5-8

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August 11, 2022
The Grief of God

Readings for today: Jeremiah 5-8

The passage from the end of Jeremiah 8 is one of the most poignant in all of Scripture and it bleeds into the beginning of chapter 9. Most English translations put these words in Jeremiah's mouth. Primarily because of how uncomfortable we are with God experiencing deep, heartbreaking grief. As Western Christians we are heavily influenced by Platonic thought whether we realize it or not. We tend to believe God is fundamentally distant. Fundamentally different. Fundamentally beyond all human experience, including emotions. We believe He is untouchable. Unmovable. Unchangeable. We associate emotions with feelings of change. Instability. Unpredictability. And these things cannot be true of God...right?

But what if we were willing to embrace a different understanding of emotions? A deeper understanding? Again, it is without question that God experiences emotions. Love. Anger. Frustration. Joy. We read about them over and over again and they are not simply anthropomorphisms. (Anthropomorphism = a way for God to express Himself in human terms we can understand. Ex. "The arm of the Lord...") What if our understanding of God could be expanded to include the full range of emotions? What if having emotions is part of being made in God's image? What if our "emotionalism", which breeds feelings of instability and unpredictability, is actually a result of sin and brokenness? What if God, because He remains untouched by sin, is able to experience all emotions without being driven by them?

This brings us back to Jeremiah 8. Here God is expressing the deepest, most heartbreaking grief possible. "My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick within me." God is experiencing an incredible sense of loss. His people have betrayed Him. They have abandoned Him. Then they turn around and blame Him. "Behold, the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and breadth of the land: "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?" They refuse to bow the knee. Refuse to repent and return to Him. Refuse to humble themselves before Him. Quite the opposite. They brazenly continue in sin. "Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols?" This is a stiff-necked people. A foolish people. A rebellious people. They take their relationship with God for granted. They are entitled. They are spoiled. They assume God will come to their rescue despite their unwillingness to walk in His ways. "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved."

The perspective shifts back to God. "For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded; I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored? Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" (Here we bleed into the beginning of chapter nine...) Again, one pictures deep, heavy sobs. God weeping a flood of tears. God experiencing unimaginable pain. Because He has freely joined Himself in an unbreakable covenant with His people, their wounds become His wounds. Their pain becomes His pain. Their heartbreak becomes His heartbreak. Things get so bad, God wishes He could leave. Abandon them to their fate. Leave the Temple in Jerusalem and return to the wilderness. Go back to the time when He tabernacled with them on the Exodus journey. "Oh that I had in the desert a travelers' lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them! For they are all adulterers, a company of treacherous men. They bend their tongue like a bow; falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, declares the

Lord.” But the Tabernacle is gone. There is no lodging place in the desert for God to run. He is stuck. He is committed. He will endure. This is the great faithfulness of our God! It is costly. It is hard. It is painful. But it remains true.

In truth, God is simply being faithful to Himself here. Faithful to the promise He has made. To be our God, come hell or high water. This was the message He communicated through the covenant He first made with Abraham in Genesis 15 and sealed through the death and resurrection of His Beloved Son Jesus Christ. His steadfast love establishes the fundamental reality of our lives. The bedrock on which we can build our lives. Without fear. Without shame. Without worry that somehow, someday there will come a day when God will finally lose patience and abandon us. God will not leave us or forsake us for in doing so He would be unfaithful to Himself. Let this truth be your firm foundation today, friends!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 9-12

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August 12, 2022
True Greatness

Readings for today: Jeremiah 9-12

I grew up with a deep sense of insecurity. I always felt like I had something to prove. Always felt like I needed to impress others. I cared a lot about what others thought. An unkind word would send me into an emotional tailspin for days. Sure, I covered well. I developed an instinct for self-preservation. I guarded my heart and let no one in. I overcompensated by chasing achievement. I drove myself hard. I refused to ever quit. Though I was never the smartest, I graduated high school with honors. Those I was never the most athletic, I lettered in two sports and made the all-state team in lacrosse. Those I was not excited about Boy Scouts, I achieved the rank of Eagle. Though I wasn't sure what I believed, I was a leader in my youth group at church, sang solos in the church choir, and even played the lead (Jesus) in a production of Godspell. By the time I got to college, I was tired. Tired of having to keep up appearances. Tired of having to pretend every single day. Tired of having to project a perfect image to the world. Furthermore, I had no close friends. No community to speak of. My family was an hour away. I felt very much alone. The results were not good. The house of cards I had built came crashing down around me. I began drinking heavily. Skipping class. Failing out of school. That's when I met Jesus. He overwhelmed all my defenses. He penetrated to the depths of my heart. And He let me know I was deeply and dearly loved. Loved for who I was not who I pretended to be. Loved fully and completely and unconditionally. To say it was life-changing would be an understatement.

I love this verse from our reading today...“Thus says the Lord: Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.”(Jeremiah 9:23-24) It describes the old Doug and the new Doug so well. I used to be the guy who would boast in his wisdom. Boast in his strength. Boast in his success. But I knew deep down I was just covering for my insecurity. After meeting Jesus, I learned to boast only in Him. He became my security. He became my wisdom. He became my strength. Serving Him became my success. Learning to practice steadfast love and justice and righteousness in the earth became the goal of my life. After almost thirty years, I can say with confidence that my life is richer and more full than I could ever have imagined. I am wiser and stronger than I've ever been. I've experienced far more success than I ever deserved or could have achieved on my own. All because of Jesus.

It's so tempting to boast in the things of this world. To get caught up trying to keep up with those around us. Compare ourselves to other people's highlight reels on social media. Cover for our insecurities by chasing temporal wisdom, riches, success, or power. It's so easy to spend our lives trying to find something...anything...to boast in. To base our self-esteem on our own abilities and accomplishments. But God wants so much more for us. God has so much more for us. If we will simply turn to Him and let Him in, He will do more than we can ever ask or imagine.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 13-16

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August 13, 2022
A Prophet's Pain

Readings for today: Jeremiah 13-16

The prophetic burden is a terrible one. It comes with incredible pain and suffering. It is accompanied by conflict and persecution. It is not a call that brings glory or honor, riches or wealth. It is a costly burden. It will sap one's mental, emotional, and physical strength. It will leave one often feeling weak and helpless. I have met many such prophets in my life. They are serving in some of the darkest places on the face of the earth. Their bodies bear the scars of their work. No one will ever know their name. They are desperately poor. They often go hungry and thirsty. They weep frequently. They feel so alone. They are beaten. They are threatened. They are often left for dead. And yet, they never stop preaching. Never stop speaking God's truth to those around them. They remind me of Jeremiah.

"O Lord, you know; remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. In your forbearance take me not away; know that for your sake I bear reproach. Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts. I did not sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?" (Jeremiah 15:15-18)

I love the raw honesty of Jeremiah. He never sugarcoats his life. He never pretends his call is easy or fulfilling or fun. He is hurting. He is in pain. He suffers tremendously. He is attacked on every side. He has no friends to speak of. No one to share his burden. He sits alone. When he does open his mouth, he is "a man of strife and contention" to His people. They curse him when they see him. They hate what he has to say. They refuse to believe him. When Jeremiah first accepted God's call, he rejoiced. God's Word became his joy. It was an honor to be called by God's name. But his joy has turned to sorrow. His rejoicing has turned to mourning. Honor has turned to shame. For the Lord's sake, Jeremiah bears reproach. He is hated and despised. God has filled him with indignation. Honestly, it feels to Jeremiah like he got a raw deal.

Though I would never claim the prophet's mantle, I have tasted a bit of Jeremiah's pain. I have felt the indignation Jeremiah references when I have felt compelled to preach God's truth and confront the idolatry of God's people. I have been cursed for preaching on ethnic reconciliation. I have been criticized harshly for confronting things like preference-driven worship, greedy and power-hungry preachers, or unhealthy and toxic congregational systems. I have taken some shots over the years for my biblical views on sexuality and marriage. I have been attacked for the fact that I am pro-life from the womb to the tomb. I have to admit in my darker moments I too wonder if I got a raw deal. But then the Lord encourages me just as He encouraged Jeremiah.

"Therefore thus says the Lord: If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before Me. If you utter what is precious and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. They shall turn to you but you shall not turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 15:19-20) God is faithful. If we take our stand on His Word, we will never be defeated or put to shame. If we walk in His ways, He promises to be with us and save us and deliver us. He will guide us and protect us. He will strengthen us and equip us for every task He sets before us. This call is not just for preachers like me. Not just for prophets like Jeremiah or my friends overseas. It is for every Christian. Every person who calls on the name of the Lord. So stand before the Lord, friends! Utter what is precious and good and righteous and true. Trust Him for your deliverance and salvation. He will stand by your side!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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August 15, 2022
Logical Consequences

Readings for today: Jeremiah 17-20

One of the images Jesus refers to the most when describing the character and nature of God is that of a Father. Jesus calls Him “Abba.” (Mark 14:36) When teaching His disciples how to pray, He encourages them to begin, “Our Father who art in heaven...” (Matthew 6:9) When describing God to His disciples, Jesus calls him a “good father who knows how to give good gifts to His children.” (Matthew 7:11) He tells them their Heavenly Father delights in them and it is His pleasure to give them the Kingdom. (Luke 12:32) When Jesus Himself is suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane, He prays, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me...” (Matthew 26:39) And when He hangs in agony on the Cross, it is to His Father that He appeals for our forgiveness. (Luke 23:34)

God is a faithful Father. As such, He knows what is best for His children. He knows what it takes for them to flourish and thrive. He knows how to give them good gifts and bless them. But He also knows how to discipline them. He knows when to step back and let them face the consequences of the choices they have made. He knows that sometimes children need to experience the “curse” of a life lived apart from God. Think of the story of the prodigal son from Luke 15 and how the Father in that story allows His son to take his inheritance and squander it. The Father in that parable never stops loving His son. Never stops waiting up for His son. Never stops hoping and longing for the day when His son will return. But He also never rescues His son. He never enables His son. He knows His son has to make His own choice to reject the “curse” and return for the “blessing.”

Listen to how Jeremiah describes this dynamic in Jeremiah 17:5-6, “Thus says the Lord: Cursed is the one who trusts in themselves and trusts in their strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. She shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land...” (see pic below from the Judean wilderness)



Contrast this with Jeremiah 17:7-8, “Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is in the Lord. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and it is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.” (See pic below from Jericho which is one of the largest desert oases in the world)



Again, God is a faithful Father. He honors the choices of His children and allows them to face the consequences of their decisions. When we turn away from God and reject His will for our lives, we should not be surprised when we end up in desert places. Places where life is hard and sustenance is scarce and death is an ever-present companion. When we find ourselves in these places, it's not so much that God has cursed us as much as we have cursed ourselves. The same is true with blessing. If we will turn to God and walk in His ways, we will find ourselves flourishing like an oasis in the desert. Bearing fruit throughout all the different seasons of life. Tapped into springs of living water that never cease to flow. Friends, this is your Father's heart for you today. Turn to Him and receive the blessings He has stored up for those He loves.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 21-24

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August 16, 2022
The Battle for the Heart

Readings for today: Jeremiah 21-24

Today's reading makes me so thankful for Jesus. Jesus died in my place. He took the full wrath and fury my sin had earned on Himself. He endured the suffering. The pain. The horrors of hell that I may live. Without Christ, I would be lost. Rightfully condemned. At the mercy of God's judgment. Just like the people of Israel.

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

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

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

Jesus is our righteousness, friends. God made Him who knew no sin to actually become sin on our behalf. To bear the full weight of the world's sin. Past. Present. Future. He took all my sin. All my

brokenness. All my fears. He took all my rebellion. All my rejection. All my disdain. He took all my selfishness. All my greed. All my lusts. And He nailed them to the cross. By His wounds, I am healed. By His brokenness, I am made whole. By His chains, I am set free. By His death, I am given new life.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 25-28

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August 17, 2022
The Patience of God

Readings for today: Jeremiah 25-28

We talk about it all the time in my home...the school of hard knocks. Reality being the best and most effective teacher. As each of my children has grown up, we have done our best to teach them and instruct them in the ways of the Lord. We've done our best to help them understand the consequences - good or bad - of the choices they make. We've done our best to come alongside them when they stumble and fall. But at the end of the day, each of them in their own way has had to figure some things out on their own. They've had to come face to face with reality and learn that the world is not very accommodating. When I take a step back, it's a fascinating process to watch unfold. I've gone from being the smartest person they know when they are young to the dumbest person they know when they are teenagers back to pretty smart again when they get into their early twenties. Through it all, my wife and I've learned to be patient. To wait on the Lord. To wait on our children. To let them go through hard experiences and learn difficult lessons so that they will be better for it in the long run. Does it mean crying a lot of tears? Yes. Does it mean dealing with the anxieties and fears that come with parenting? Absolutely. Is it hard to watch your children go through suffering? Without a doubt. It continually keeps us on our knees before the Lord, hoping our children will relent and see the light and return to Him. Thankfully, all of them are on that journey and because we've loved them well, we get to be part of it.

Now step back and try to put yourself in God's position. For generations, He has been reaching out to His people. He has sent them prophets and preachers. He has performed miracle after miracle. He has given them His Word and provided for them a Land. He has done all these things out of love but they have rejected Him. "You have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear, although the Lord persistently sent to you all His servants the prophets saying, Turn now, every one of you, from his evil way and evil deeds, and dwell upon the land that the Lord has given to you and your fathers from of old and forever. Do not go after other gods to serve and worship them or provoke me to anger with the work of your hands. Then I will do you no harm. Yet you have not listened to Me, declares the Lord, that you might provoke me to anger with the work of your hands to your own harm." (Jeremiah 25:4-7) The natural consequence of the people's rejection of God is judgment. God will send Babylon against His people and all the surrounding nations. None shall escape. The whole land will become a ruin and a waste. And lest we think God is being too harsh here, God makes it clear that His judgment is righteous and just and good. "I will recompense them according to their deeds and the work of their hands." (Jeremiah 25:14)

Human beings have never truly grasped the depths of their sin. We have never truly understood the depths of our depravity. We were given authority and dominion by God at the beginning but we have made a complete mess of things. We want to be like God but we reign like a tyrant over a world that is suffering and tormented. We are selfish and greedy. We treat the earth like a disposable resource. We dismiss or ignore or disdain other human beings made in the image of God simply because they look different or act different or speak different or spend money different or vote different. And still God loves us. Still God reaches out to us. Still God is patient with us. "Thus says the Lord: Stand in the court of the Lord's house and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the Lord all the words that I command you to speak to them; do not hold back a word. It may be they will listen and every one turn from his evil way that I may relent of the disaster that I intend to do to them because of their evil deeds." (Jeremiah 26:2-3) God longs for us to return to Him. He longs for us to return to His ways. He longs for us to return to His love. Today is yet another opportunity to turn back to Him. Why delay any longer? Why keep holding out? Why keep running from Him? The God who loves you so much is patiently waiting for you to come home.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 29-32

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August 18, 2022
God's Plan

Readings for today: Jeremiah 29-32

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

Think about the collective shock we've felt during the COVID pandemic. Public health models predicting millions of deaths. Hospitals filling up. Cities on lockdown. A robust economy crashing to a halt. As weeks turned to months, frustration reached a boiling point. Then George Floyd was killed. Thousands of protesters filled the streets. Peace gave way to violence as the sun set in many of our cities. Looting. Rioting. Burning. Then came election season. A bare-knuckle affair that left a nation more divided than ever. Then came January 6th and the fallout. At times, it has felt like our society was on the verge of collapse. But as bad as the last several months have been, it could have been much, much worse. Imagine groups like Antifa or the Proud Boys or some other extremist group having their way? Imagine anarchy breaking loose not just in a small autonomous zone in Seattle but across the country. Imagine all the hateful, violent rhetoric becoming reality. Imagine an enemy invading the United States like Ukraine. Imagine our political and social leaders imprisoned, tortured, and killed. Imagine the systematic destruction of every monument we've ever built. Washington, Lincoln, and Jefferson memorials all destroyed. Arlington, the US Capitol, and the White House all burned to the ground. Imagine these invaders attempting to erase "America" from the face of the earth. This is what the Israelites experienced and as they begin to settle into captivity...into slavery...into their new lives as strangers and foreigners in a new land, they receive the strangest letter from Jeremiah.

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

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

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

It is only AFTER all these difficult things have been said that Jeremiah pens the words we love to quote so much, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 33-37

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August 19, 2022
God's Word

Readings for today: Jeremiah 33-37

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

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

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

It is a serious matter to reject the Word of God. To disobey His commands. Whether by ignorance or by deliberate defiance, we rebel against God to our own peril. God takes our sin seriously. Far more seriously than we know. He is so holy. So righteous. So just. His nose cannot bear the stench of sin. His eyes will not behold the stain of sin. His presence will not endure even the appearance of sin. It must be dealt with. It must be done away with. A price must be paid. A sacrifice offered. It will either be us or it will be Christ. Either you receive Christ as your perfect sacrifice. Receive Christ as your perfect substitute. Receive Christ's atoning death on your behalf or you will bear the punishment yourself.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 38-40, Psalms 74, 79

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August 20, 2022
Entitlement

Readings for today: Jeremiah 38-40, Psalms 74, 79

Have you ever been disappointed with God? Ever feel like He let you down? Ever wonder how His plans for you could be good when so many bad things are taking place? I imagine that's how King Zedekiah felt in today's reading. He hoped against all hope for an 11th hour rescue. He simply could not believe God would abandon His people. Abandon His city. Abandon His Temple. He fundamentally could not bring himself to believe things had gotten that bad. He knew his history. He could look back and tell you story after story about God relenting from disaster at the last possible moment. But then he watches in horror as the Babylonians storm a breach in the wall. He tries to escape only to be captured and forced to watch as his sons are executed in front of him. It is the last thing he will ever see as his eyes are the next thing to go. He is then shackled in chains and carried off into exile. It's a tragic ending to a tragic story.

But we've seen this before, have we not? After Adam's fall, God raises up Seth only to watch as humanity descends into chaos. He raises up Noah and rescues him from the flood only to watch Noah's descendants rebel and build a tower to the heavens. He scatters them and raises up Abraham only to watch his descendants end up in slavery in Egypt. God raises up Moses and delivers them from bondage. Brings them to a land flowing with milk and honey only to watch them forget Him and do what is right in their own eyes. So he raises up David. The man after God's own heart and sets him on the throne. But now David's descendants have followed the same path and ended up in the same place as those who've come before. In each case, I am confident the people of God believed God would never leave them or forsake them. I am confident they believed God would remain steadfast, loyal, and true. And I imagine they were incredibly disappointed when judgment came.

The reality is our disappointment with God is often grounded in entitlement. We make the mistake of taking God's grace for granted. We presume on the unconditional nature of His love. We fail to acknowledge the seriousness of our sin and refuse to take responsibility for the selfish choices we make. Bonhoeffer called this "cheap grace." Grace without cost. Love without sacrifice. Relationship without rules. Unfettered freedom which isn't really freedom at all. This is what Zedekiah believed that led to his destruction. This is what Israel believed that led to their destruction. And this is what far too many of us believe if we're honest.

Friends, we cannot blame God for the consequences of our sinful choices. We cannot blame God for our rebellion. He has warned us over and over again what will happen should we choose to reject His ways. We cannot claim to love God and not follow His commands. The two always go together. Yes, we are saved by grace. Yes, Jesus loves us with an everlasting, unconditional love. Yes, God's forgiveness is always within reach. But only for those who repent. Only for those who confess. Only for those who acknowledge their sin and actively seek to turn from their self-centered ways. This is the truth of the gospel! Grace and law hang together. Only those who believe obey and only those who obey believe or, as the old hymn put it, "Trust and obey for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus."

Readings for tomorrow: None

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August 22, 2022
Sabbath

Readings for today: 2 Kings 24-25, 2 Chronicles 36:1-21, Jeremiah 52

Today's reading includes this fascinating line from 2 Chronicles 36:20-21, "Nebuchadnezzar took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years." Most scholars believe the books of the Kings and the books of the Chronicles are written by two different authors with two different perspectives. Both agree that the reason Judah was now going into exile was due to the sins of the kings. Both agree that Nebuchadnezzar is an agent God has raised up to execute His righteous judgment. However, the Chronicler goes into further detail as to why judgment has come. Not only did the kings refuse to humble themselves before the prophet Jeremiah and obey the Word of the Lord, they ignored the Sabbath. They broke the fourth commandment. They refused to give the land its rest. According to Leviticus 25:3-4, "For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather its fruits, but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord. You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard." Sabbath rest for the land was part of a healthy agricultural cycle God hardwired into creation. It also served as a reminder to the people of God of their dependence on Him. In the Sabbath year when the land is at rest, they would have to trust God to produce what they needed. Furthermore, it reset humanity's relationship with the earth. It reminds us of the calling God placed on our lives at creation - to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and exercise dominion as stewards over all God has made. The earth is not a possession to exploit or abuse but something to nurture and cherish.

Our world would do well to recover the idea of Sabbath and God's people should be the first to show them the way. Beginning in the way we lead our lives, we take one day out of every seven to rest from our labors. We worship. We rest. We sleep. We disconnect from technology. We enjoy time with those we love. We engage in those activities that bring us joy. Second, we seek to create Sabbath opportunities for those around us. If we are employers, we give our employees generous time off. We create space for them to worship and rest and recharge. We give our business a rest as well. We refuse to bow the knee to the relentless pressure to turn a profit. We refuse to believe the lie that "time is money." This is what drives a company like Chick fil-A to remain closed on Sundays. Third, we create Sabbath for the world we inhabit. If we are engaged in agriculture, we practice crop rotations and other such things that give the land a rest and allow it recharge. If we are energy producers, we seek to minimize our environmental impact, expand into renewables, and do all we can to steward our resources well. If we are architects and engineers, we try to build with the land rather than against it. Rather than engage in a running war with the earth, we seek to build our communities in partnership with it. If we are government leaders, we incentivize new technologies that leave less of a mark on the planet and regulate business in order to eliminate abuses like overfishing, strip mining, or slash and burn farming techniques. All of these examples are not just good social policy but actually have biblical warrant in the foundational principle of Sabbath.

Practicing Sabbath is revolutionary. It's also deeply Biblical. God ordained the Sabbath when He chose to rest on the seventh day of creation. God set up all of life and all of creation to operate according to a divine rhythm. Mornings and evenings. Springtime and harvest. Six days to labor and one day to rest. Six years to plant and prune and one year to lie fallow. We ignore these rhythms to our peril. Those who refuse to take one day out of seven to rest find themselves anxious and stressed and unhealthy.

Human beings simply were not meant to run 24/7. Employers who drive their employees relentlessly without giving them a break will find themselves with high turnover and lower quality products. Communities that ignore the contours of the land on which they are built will find themselves at greater risk of floods, earthquakes, and other natural disasters. These are the consequences of ignoring Sabbath and we see the examples all around us.

So what are we to do? What's the first step towards change? It begins with each one of us making a conscious, intentional decision to set one day in seven apart for worship and rest before the Lord. Creatively finding ways to disconnect from email and social media, putting work aside, and getting outside to enjoy all God has made. What does Sabbath look like in your life today?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 41-44

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August 23, 2022
Fear or Faith?

Readings for today: Jeremiah 41-44

One of the things I get to do in my line of work is help churches that find themselves in crisis. Leadership failings. Trust issues. Organizational chaos. There are lots of reasons churches struggle and when it gets to a certain point, they cry out for help. That's often when I am called to go in. We begin working with the pastors. Working with the elders. Working with the leaders. And the biggest challenge we face in these situations is to help people who are often hurting, angry, fearful, and afraid walk by faith.

Jeremiah faced the same challenge. The national crisis of God's people deepens with the murder of the Babylonian governor. The people of God come to Jeremiah and ask him to pray on their behalf. What should they do? How should they respond? They are naturally afraid of the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar. Will he return and utterly destroy them? Will he seek retribution for the murder of his official? What's going to happen? Jeremiah seeks the Lord on their behalf and the Lord graciously answers. "If you will remain in this land, then I will build you up and not pull you down; I will plant you, and not pluck you up; for I relented of the disaster that I did to you. Do not fear the king of Babylon, of whom you are afraid. Do not fear him, declares the Lord, for I am with you, to save you and to deliver you from his hand. I will grant you mercy, that he may have mercy on you and let you remain in your own land." (Jeremiah 42:10-12) What an amazing promise! Even now, after all their sin and rebellion, God is willing to forgive and show mercy and establish them in the Promised Land. Even now, God is willing to bless them and help them and come to their aid. Yes, it will require a step of faith. It will require them to be humble. Submit to Nebuchadnezzar once again. It will require faith as they wait to see how the Babylonians will respond. But if they will do these things, God will be with them.

Sadly, their fear gets the best of them. "Azariah the son of Hoshai and Johanan the son of Kareah and all the insolent men said to Jeremiah, "You are telling a lie. The Lord our God did not send you to say, 'Do not go to Egypt to live there,' but Baruch the son of Neriah has set you against us, to deliver us into the hand of the Chaldeans, that they may kill us or take us into exile in Babylon." (Jeremiah 43:2-3) They flee to Egypt. Back to the place where they were once enslaved. They begin to worship Egyptian gods. They leave the land of promise for a foreign land to serve foreign masters hoping they will protect them and keep them safe.

We walk by faith and not by sight. It's not easy. It often seems illogical to our human minds. Azariah and Johanan were doing what made sense. It makes sense to run for cover when you are afraid. It makes sense to run to Egypt, the world's only other superpower, to escape the wrath of the Babylonians. It makes sense to flee when you've just been conquered. It is natural to be afraid in such situations. But it is PRECISELY in these moments, when things are at their darkest and most bleak, that we turn to God in faith.

Many churches I've worked with over the years have sadly not been able to make this turn. They keep trying to handle things on their own. They keep turning to their own wisdom. They keep trying to operate according to their own strength. They falsely believe if they can just get another pastor. If they can just get rid of a certain leader. If they can just hit on the right program. Attract the right kind of people. Success will come. They turn to business principles. They go to conferences. They talk vision and values and policies and procedures. They try so hard and all the while God is in heaven reaching

out to them. Calling them to slow down. Simplify. Sit with Him in prayer. Rebuild trust by spending time together in the Word and just sharing life.

Thankfully, I've seen some wonderful successes along the way as well. Churches who finally come to the end of themselves and are ready to submit to God. Ready to walk by faith not by sight. Ready to look past attendance and budget and building issues and let God restore them. They are ready to put aside all the talk about vision and values and leadership and let the Spirit show them the way. They are ready to stop looking to organizational solutions for spiritual problems and instead rely on God. It's a beautiful thing to watch as God builds them back up. Replants the fields and brings in a harvest. Friends, if we trust God, He will come through!

Readings for tomorrow: Obadiah 1, Psalms 82-83

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August 24, 2022
Family Feud

Readings for today: Obadiah 1, Psalms 82-83

There's nothing worse than a family feud. Especially one that lasts generations. Two brothers grow up together. Polar opposites in personality, they never get along. One is favored by his father, the other by his mother. One loves hunting, camping, fishing, and the outdoors. The other prefers staying at home, reading, studying, enjoying the finer things of life. One is big and strong. A mountain of a man. The other is small and thin. He's the intellectual. One day, the big, strong older brother comes in from hunting and is famished. The younger brother has been cooking all day. The older brother asks for some food but the younger brother refuses him unless he gives up his birthright. The stage is set for the younger brother to usurp the older brother's place in the family. Many years pass. Their father is failing. It's time to divide up the inheritance. The younger brother steals the favored place in the family. The older brother is enraged. He seeks revenge. The younger brother leaves home. He's gone for years. When he finally comes home, he's prospered. In his absence, so has the older brother. They meet. They forgive. But their families remain separate. Their clans do not mingle. There is no indication they even see each other again.

Fast forward generations. Hundreds of years. Edom and Israel are now mortal enemies. Locked in perpetual conflict. What began with a bowl of porridge has become a tribal war. Seems crazy, doesn't it? And yet, it's not an uncommon story. Especially in "honor/shame" cultures where defending one's family reputation is taken very seriously. Through it all, God has been watching. Watching these two "brothers" fight. Watching their descendants go back and forth. Now judgment has come for Esau has gone too far. "Because of the violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever." (Obadiah 1:10) It's painful to read.

Family feuds are the worst. There's nothing worse than going to war with the people you love. Husbands. Wives. Mothers. Fathers. Children. Grandchildren. Brothers. Sisters. It's heartbreaking. It doesn't matter if the conflict is large or small, it's always painful. Working through it requires great courage and humility as we forgive, reconcile, and restore relationships. It's some of them hardest work we will ever do.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells a very famous story. Two brothers and a father. The younger brother comes and shames his father by asking him to give him his inheritance early. For some reason, he doesn't want to be part of the family anymore. The father graciously agrees. The older brother is horrified. His anger begins to smolder. The younger brother heads off on his own. He wastes everything he has on sinful living. Gossip and rumors filter back to the family of his experiences bringing more shame and more dishonor on the family's reputation. The older brother is enraged. He secretly begins wishing his younger brother would die. Meanwhile, the younger brother loses everything. Things are so bad, he takes on the most shameful profession there is for a Jew. Feeding pigs. He's starving. He's destitute. He has nothing left. Coming to the end of himself, he finally decides to return home. To face the family he once left. To ask for mercy and perhaps be taken on as a hired servant. On his way home, he rehearses what he will say when he finally sees his father. But while is far off...the Bible says...the father sees him! He's been waiting! Hoping! Praying for the day when his younger son would appear on the horizon! He runs to him. He embraces him. He gives him the family robe and signet ring. He welcomes him home with a feast. Meanwhile, the older brother's rage now erupts. He refuses to embrace his brother. Refuses to forgive. Refuses to reconcile. Refuses to welcome him back into the

family. And what does the father do? Runs to him as well. Embraces him. Assures him of his great love.

The parable ends with a cliffhanger. What will the older brother do? How will he respond? Will he follow his father's example and embrace his brother once again? Think about your own family. What relationships need reconciliation? Where does forgiveness need to be offered and received? What does restoration look like? Think about your own position in your family. Are you the prodigal son whose left home and damaged relationships? Are you the older brother whose anger and rage threaten the possibility of reconciliation? Are you the father who embraces both his sons with grace and love?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 45-48

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August 25, 2022
The Lord's Discipline

Readings for today: Jeremiah 45-48

The Lord disciplines those He loves. I remember when I first ran across those words from Hebrews 12:6. They resonated deeply. As Christians, we believe God is our Heavenly Father. We believe He is a Good Father who delights in giving good gifts to His children. We believe He is a Faithful Father who walks with us every step of the way throughout all of life. We believe He is a Wise Father who knows what's best for us. As such, it makes perfect sense that He would discipline me when I go astray. It makes perfect sense that He would say "No" when I ask for something outside of His will for my life. It makes perfect sense that He would lovingly but firmly correct me when I am engaged in sin.

God made a covenant with Israel after delivering them from bondage in Egypt. He promised to be their God. He promised to be faithful and true and steadfast and loyal to them. He promised to walk with them wherever they would go. He promised to be good to them and bless them and keep them. But God was also clear as to what would happen should Israel forsake the covenant and worship other gods. He would punish them. He would discipline them. He would lovingly but firmly correct them. Now His judgment may seem harsh in light of everything we have read. The pain and suffering they've endured has been immense. The devastation and destruction overwhelming. So many have lost their lives and lost loved ones as a result of all that has happened. This is loving discipline? No thanks! But take a moment and try to look at things from God's perspective. Recall to mind all the injustice and oppression and idolatry and violence and abuse of power that had taken place under the evil kings who ruled both the northern and southern kingdoms. Called to be the light, Israel had become a land of deep darkness. Called to be set apart, Israel had become just like her pagan neighbors. Called to be righteous and good, Israel had become corrupt and evil. It's hard to overstate the horror she had become so God brings forth His judgment.

God's goal in judgment is never the complete destruction of His people though they have rightfully earned such a fate. It is always to turn them back to Him. Even here at the end of Jeremiah after all has been lost and the nation scattered, the prophet sounds a note of hope. "Fear not, O Jacob my servant, declares the Lord, for I am with you. I will make a full end of all the nations to which I have driven you, but of you I will not make a full end. I will discipline you in just measure, and I will by no means leave you unpunished." (Jeremiah 46:28) Yes, the evil Israel has committed in God's name must be dealt with but God will never forsake the covenant He made with them. Yes, their sin must be atoned for but God will never abandon them to their fate. He will discipline them in just measure. He will punish them for their transgressions. But He will restore them as well and gather them from the nations to which they have been scattered.

Now consider your own life. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He still disciplines those He loves. He still corrects those who've gone astray. He still confronts us in our sin. But thankfully ALL of His wrath and judgment was poured out on Jesus at the Cross. All our sin was atoned for by Jesus' sacrificial death. God's justice has been perfectly satisfied in Christ. This is unbelievably good news! Because of what Jesus has accomplished for us, we receive mercy and forgiveness rather than judgment and punishment. God's discipline is kind and gentle even as it is firm and righteous. Yes, we will still experience the natural consequences of our sin but God is always faithful to welcome us back home.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 49-50

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August 26, 2022
Biblical Archeology

Readings for today: Jeremiah 49-50

I have stood on the mound in Rabbath-Ammon. I have seen the ruins of Edom. I have spoken to the descendants of Kedar. It's a powerful experience to see the Bible come to life. To connect the dots between what we read in Jeremiah today and real life events. The archeological "tel" in the modern day city of Amman, Jordan dates back to the Bronze Age (1800 BCE). Walking among the ruins, one can see evidence of the Romans, Byzantines, and Umayyads. As they have excavated certain portions, they found a tomb dating to the middle Bronze Age that held some pottery. They also found evidence of the ancient capital of the nation of Ammon. In fact, the oldest known inscription of the Ammonite language was discovered here. The museum that was built on site holds some of the oldest pieces artifacts ever unearthed. It's really something to behold.

The ruins of Edom are just as powerful. I took a tour of Wadi Rum and saw the places where ancient caravans would stop to rest and water their camels before continuing north. It's also the wilderness where Israel wandered after coming up out of the Red Sea. It's desolate. Empty. Dangerous. It's easy to see why Israel spent so much time complaining and longing for Egypt. There's simply nothing out there. Petra was a marvel, of course. Though not Edomite, it was a major city in the region built by the Nabateans. One also encounters the Bedouins in this region of the world. Descendants of nomadic tribes like the Kedarites referenced in today's reading. They largely maintain the same way of life their ancestors did.

What's my takeaway from the journey? How does it relate to today's reading? Jeremiah makes it clear that kingdoms come and go. Nations rise and fall. As powerful as one country may be at a particular moment, there is already another rising that will take its place. This was true in the ancient world and it's just as true today. Only the Kingdom of God lasts forever. Only the Triune God reigns supreme. He has no rival. He has no equal. There are none who can match his power. I love how Psalm 2 puts it, "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." (Psalm 2:1-6)

As believers in Jesus Christ, we place our trust in the King of kings and Lord of lords. While we may love and serve our earthly kingdoms, we do not give them our final or ultimate allegiance. We know they will one day fall just as surely as Ammon and Edom and Damascus. We must learn from those who have gone before us and whose voices cry out to us from the ruins they left behind. They spent their lives building great civilizations and monuments only to watch them disappear into the sands of the desert. Will we do the same? Or will we spend our lives building for a different kind of kingdom? A kingdom that never ends?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 51, Psalms 137

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August 27, 2022
The Language of Suffering

Readings for today: Jeremiah 51, Psalms 137

One of the most important things to keep in mind as you read the Bible are the different genres of Scripture. It's not all directions and commands. There is history. There is poetry. There are wisdom sayings. There is storytelling. There are parables. All of it is God's Word. All of it is useful for teaching and correction and encouragement.

Today's reading from Psalm 137 is a gut-wrenching one. It is a song sung from the perspective of those recently exiled to Babylon. Force-marched over 900 miles, they arrive at the Euphrates. Held captive and enslaved, they have lost all hope. They had just witnessed the destruction of their entire way of life. They come to the waters of Babylon and they sit and they weep. Their cries fill the air. They shared their memories of better days when they walked the streets of Zion. They were so heartbroken, they longed to hang up their instruments and sing no more but their captors forced them. Adding insult to injury, they mocked them saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." Sing us one of the songs of deliverance. Tell us stories about the God who abandoned you in your hour of greatest need. It is an incredibly heartbreaking scene.

It reminds me of a book I once read titled, *Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers* by African Americans. Scholars have uncovered a treasure trove of prayers going all the way back to the days of slavery and it is powerful to read them. To place oneself in their shoes and imagine their pain and suffering. To hear their hearts as they cry out to God for deliverance and healing and freedom. It is not a book you can read dispassionately. It brings tears to your eyes at times. The raw emotion is moving. It's also what informs so many of negro spirituals. Songs like *Go Down Moses*, *Give Me Jesus*, and *Wade in the Water*. Their music and prayers rose out of their pain and gives them an unmatched gravitas that moves hearts to this day.

Psalm 137 ends with a terrible request, "O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" (Psalms 137:8-9) It is horrifying and yet it is as honest and real as it gets. By including it in the canon of Scripture, God is not promising to answer such prayers as much as letting us know He listens to them. No matter how dark our prayers become. No matter how angry we get. Even if we lace our prayers with profanity and frustration. God hears them. God welcomes them. God is a big boy and can handle all we can throw at Him. He is not afraid to get down into the muck and mire. He's not afraid to dig through the manure pile that our lives can become. He is with us in the midst of the deepest heartaches and terrible tragedies. It doesn't matter whether we find ourselves in Jerusalem or Babylon. At home or in exile. Feeling blessed or cursed. God is there. We can talk to Him. We can share our deepest thoughts and emotions with Him. We don't need to be ashamed. We don't need to hide. He is our Father and He understands our fears.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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August 29, 2022

Lament

Readings for today: Lamentations 1:1-3:36

I have a friend named Dinesh. Dinesh is a Ugandan pastor who ministers in the northern part of his country. When he was a boy, he lived under the constant threat of terrorism. The Lord's Resistance Army under the leadership of Joseph Kony was very active in his region. He was trained by his family to run into the bush when he heard the jeeps and trucks roll into his village. He escaped several times over the years only to come back and find the bodies of his family members who had been killed. Eventually, those living in villages all over northern Uganda escaped to cities like Kitgum where Dinesh now lives. They found safety in numbers but they left their homes behind. They left their livelihoods behind. The cities were not set up to support all the refugees so many of them suffered from life-threatening poverty. It's been many years since Kony ravaged the region. The latest news has him hiding out in the Central African Republic, a shadow of his former self. Still, the people are afraid to go home. They believe their villages are cursed. The memories of death and destruction are too painful to face. It reminds me of Lamentations.

“My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out to the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because infants and babies faint in the streets of the city. They cry to their mothers, “Where is bread and wine?” as they faint like a wounded man in the streets of the city, as their life is poured out on their mothers' bosom...In the dust of the streets lie the young and the old; my young women and my young men have fallen by the sword; you have killed them in the day of your anger, slaughtering without pity.” (Lamentations 2:11-12, 21) It's hard to believe this kind of thing still happens around the world. But it's more common than we realize. This fall I hope to travel to the northern regions of Ethiopia where a civil war has been raging for the last couple of years. We are hoping to launch over seventy new church planters into the area to bring the hope of the gospel to people who are experiencing unbelievable suffering. We will work alongside our indigenous leaders to empower them and equip them and resource them as they rebuild. But it will not be an easy task. The trauma is immense. The pain is very real. We will lament even as we labor to bring renewal and restoration.

It's not easy to read a book like Lamentations. It's not easy to enter another person's pain and suffering. It's not easy to hear them cry out. It's not easy to look at the world through their tear-filled eyes. It's not easy to sit with them in the ashes and dust of their lives and listen to them. And yet the Lord calls us to weep with those who weep. To mourn with those who mourn. To grieve with those who grieve. Jeremiah models this for us by putting these words to paper. Though he knows God is in the right, his heart breaks for God's people. He feels their pain intensely. Listen to just a few of the verses from Lamentations 3 again, “I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath; he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light...He has made my flesh and my skin waste away...he has broken my bones; he has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago...though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer...he turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces; he has made me desolate...He drove into my kidneys the arrows of his quiver...He has filled me with bitterness; he has sated me with wormwood...He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes; my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, “My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord.” (Lamentations 3:1-2, 4, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15-18) All hope seems lost but Jeremiah continues to turn to the Lord. “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” The Lord is good

to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.” (Lamentations 3:21-26)

God is always faithful. Even in judgment, His desire is to bring mercy and forgiveness and grace. His love is steadfast, loyal, faithful, and true. It never wavers. It never ceases. It never fails. No matter where you may find yourself today, turn to the Lord! Make Him your portion! Make Him your hope! Make Him your sanctuary! No matter what pain or suffering you may endure, wait for the Lord. Seek His face! Trust He is already on His way to bring deliverance and salvation in this life and the next!

Readings for tomorrow: Lamentations 3:37-5:22

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August 30, 2022

Next Steps

Readings for today: Lamentations 3:37-5:22

What comes after lament? That's a question I often deal with as a pastor. I walk with people through crisis. I sit with people in their grief. I do my best to comfort them as they mourn. I help them process their pain. After making space for all of the heartache, what comes next? After walking through the valley of the shadow of death together, what happens when one gets to the other side? Honestly, in my experience, this is where the hard work really begins.

I think of a woman I once knew who was married for decades. On the outside, things in their family looked good. He was very successful in his business. They were able to travel the world together. Pursue whatever their hearts desired. But after he passed and the funeral was over, the real truth began to emerge. Alcoholism. Abuse. A life of torment and fear. As the widow and I met to process what she was feeling, we talked about her need for healing. Her need to recover. Her need to be patient and give herself time to work through all the emotions she was experiencing. We also talked about what life would look like on the other side. Her desire to be married again. Her desire to pursue some of the dreams her husband had denied her. Her desire to reconnect with their estranged children and recover some of the years they had lost. This would require a lot of introspection and self-reflection. Owning what she needed to own and disowning what she needed to disown. Thankfully, she had the courage to walk the road faithfully before the Lord. She took up hobbies like horseback riding and cooking. She renewed her relationship with her son. She began dating a good man who treated her with the love and respect she deserved. It was beautiful to watch.

We catch Jeremiah at a much earlier, much darker place in the journey. He is still very much processing his pain. The heartache is real. The emotions are visceral. Though the reading is hard, it is good to know we can be raw and real before God. At the same time, we see the stirrings of a new season begin to emerge as well. Jeremiah calling for the people of Israel to think about what comes next after lament. Once they've fully grieved, they will need to take some time to reflect and repent and renew their faith and trust in God. "Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come? Why should the living complain about the punishment of their sins? Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord! Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven..." (Lamentations 3:37-41) Jeremiah knows what comes next. He knows the people of God must return to Him if they are experience the healing and restoration their hearts so desperately long for.

Anyone who has ever walked with grief knows the journey well. It begins in deep darkness where it's hard to see any light at all. Momentum begins to pick up as we take our initial steps and the darkness doesn't seem as deep. As we continue walking the road, a light does appear at the end of the tunnel. Eventually, as we keep doing the work, we emerge into the bright sunshine of a new day. God is faithful! He will walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death and as we turn to Him - lifting up our hearts and hands in worship - He promises to cast out all our fear and bring us to green pastures and still waters, to places where we will find our souls restored.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 1-4

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August 31, 2022
Seeing God's Glory

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

How many times have I prayed over the years to see the glory of God? But am I prepared for God to answer that prayer? Reading through the opening words of Ezekiel is a bit frightening. Ezekiel's vision of God's glory is simply overwhelming. Angels in flight. Faces constantly shifting and changing. Wheels spinning. Fire and lightning flashing. It levels the prophet. "Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking." (Ezekiel 1:28) Such is always the case when we come face to face with God's glory. Moses could only bear to see it in passing. Isaiah cried out in fear because he was a man of unclean lips. Ezekiel falls on his face. Even the disciples fall down prostrate before the Lord when He reveals Himself in power and exercises His divine authority.

Thankfully, God doesn't leave us on our faces. He is not interested in making us grovel before Him. He has no need to prove Himself to us or demonstrate His power over us. Instead, He lifts us up. He invites us to become part of what He's doing in the world. He encourages us and strengthens us. Listen to what He says to Ezekiel, "Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you." And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me." (Ezekiel 2:1-2) God has a plan for Ezekiel's life. He will use Ezekiel to speak His Word to His people. There will be words of comfort and confrontation. Blessed words of hope and strong words of warning. It's an open question as to whether or not they will receive God's Word but no matter what they will know a prophet has been among them. A man full of the Spirit of the Living God.

The Word Ezekiel is called to preach is not easy. The Spirit of God will make his face like flint. His forehead like emery. His words will fall on deaf ears and hard hearts. Most likely, Ezekiel will be an outcast. Isolated and lonely. Perpetually misunderstood. Many will believe he is insane. Still the call remains. This makes Ezekiel bitter on some level. He must feel trapped. Torn between the overwhelming glory of God on one hand and the hard hearts of his own people on the other. "Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me the voice of a great earthquake: "Blessed be the glory of the Lord from its place!"...The Spirit lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the Lord being strong upon me. And I came to the exiles at Tel-abib, who were dwelling by the Chebar canal, and I sat where they were dwelling. And I sat there overwhelmed among them seven days." (Ezekiel 3:12, 14-15)

Only the Spirit of God can sustain such a call. Only the Spirit of God can hold him together as he faces the challenges of the years ahead and fulfills God's call on his life. Standing as a watchman. Lying on each side for over a year. Eating unclean food cooked over human waste. It's brutal. And yet the Spirit is there with him to sustain him miraculously. Every time Ezekiel falls, the Spirit lifts him up. Every time Ezekiel finds himself at a loss for words, the Spirit is there to give him the words to speak. Every time Ezekiel feels alone and afraid, he feels the Lord's hand upon him. "And the hand of the Lord was upon me there. And he said to me, "Arise, go out into the valley, and there I will speak with you." So I arose and went out into the valley, and behold, the glory of the Lord stood there, like the glory that I had seen by the Chebar canal, and I fell on my face. But the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and he spoke with me and said to me, "Go, shut yourself within your house. And you, O son of man, behold, cords will be placed upon you, and you shall be bound with them, so that you cannot go out among the people. And I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be mute and unable to reprove them, for they are a rebellious house. But when I speak with you, I will

open your mouth, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’ He who will hear, let him hear; and he who will refuse to hear, let him refuse, for they are a rebellious house.” (Ezekiel 3:22-27)

We live in challenging times ourselves. It’s easy to become discouraged when we see what’s happening all around us. When we encounter the hardened hearts of so many people. When people refuse to listen to the Lord and return to Him. It’s easy to become bitter and disillusioned when we see so much pain. So much suffering. So much heartbreak. Much of it self-inflicted. This is especially true for those of us who have seen God’s glory revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ. Once we come to know Him, we can’t imagine life without Him. His Spirit comes to live inside us, lifting us up out of the dust and ashes. He strengthens us and encourages us. He confronts us and convicts us. He heals us and restores us. He sustains us through every trial and wipes away every tear. No matter what challenges you may face, know God is with you today!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 5-8

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