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September 1, 2022  
**The End of God's Judgment**

Readings for today: [Ezekiel 5-8](#)

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

These are all important questions to ponder but they also ultimately miss the point. God is God. He has made known His will. He has established His covenant. He has made clear His expectations. From the beginning, He held nothing back. Nothing hidden. Nothing secret. He created us to fulfill His purposes. He is the Potter. We are the clay. Our problem is we keep forgetting our place. We keep rejecting our role. We refuse to acknowledge His Lordship over our lives. Starting with Adam and Eve, we keep asserting our independence. We keep trying to be our own gods. Do things our own way. Worship as we please. Do things as we choose. And we forget the One we were created to serve. We forget the One we were created to please.

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

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

But God will not be mocked. He vents His fury without mercy. "Thus shall my anger spend itself, and I will vent my fury upon them and satisfy myself. And they shall know that I am the Lord—that I have

spoken in my jealousy—when I spend my fury upon them.” (Ezekiel 5:13) It is scary. It is frightening. It makes us tremble. And if we aren’t careful we will miss what God is trying to do. In our fear, we will focus yet again on all the wrong things. God’s judgment is NOT an end in itself! It points beyond itself to something far greater! Far more important!

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 9-12

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**September 2, 2022**  
**Seeking God's Glory**

Readings for today: Ezekiel 9-12

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

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

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

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

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

Watching out the window. Longing. Praying. Looking forward to the day when his son will come to his senses. The father runs to him. Embraces him. Gives him a robe to wear and places the signet ring back on his finger. He is home. He is one of the family again.

It's a powerful story. One that reminds us of the great love of God. It should also remind us of the consequences of our sin. The father never stopped loving the son just as God never stops loving us. But the father did let the son go. He did let the son make his own sinful decisions and then let him face the terrible consequences. The same was true for Israel. God did indeed come to dwell in His Temple. Like the father from the story, He loved His children unconditionally. Over and over He forgave them. But then there came a day when they finally said, "We don't want you here anymore. We don't want to be your children. We want to do our own thing. Live our own lives. Pursue our own happiness. Chase our own dreams. And they don't include you." So the Father did what they asked. He left His home in their hands. He removed His glorious presence. The result is pain. Suffering. Heartbreak. Such is always the case when we abandon God. At the same time, Ezekiel sounds a note of hope. Presumably, God could have chosen to leave His Temple and head in any direction. He went east. East to where the exiles lived. East to Babylon. East to find His wayward children. East to be with them in captivity. East to comfort them in their diaspora. East to provide for them and make them prosper. East to join them.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 13-16

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**September 3, 2022**  
**The Bride of Christ**

Readings for today: Ezekiel 13-16

The graphic imagery from chapter 16 of Ezekiel has grown on me over the years. Whereas I initially struggled to get through this chapter and those like it, I now find it presenting a deeply compelling picture of the gospel. A gospel that was as much for Israel as it is for us today. In this chapter, God describes His journey with His people from His point of view. He reminds them He was there at their birth when no one wanted to claim them. He reminds them of His tender mercies and lovingkindness and the lavish blessings He gave to them. He reminds them of their betrayal of His love and His faithfulness to the everlasting covenant He had made. This is their story. This is our story. This is the gospel story.

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

We grew up under God's watchful eye and gracious care. When the time was right, God took us as His bride. He covered our nakedness with the corner of His garment. He made His vow and covenant with us. He bestowed riches and honor and glory on us as befits the bride of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And the whole world marveled at what God had done. The whole world came to see the splendor and glory of Israel just as she came to see the splendor and glory of the church. The whole world envied the relationship we had with our God.

But we grew proud. We began to believe our own hype. We read our own press clippings. We trusted in our riches and beauty and power and influence. We abandoned our covenant with the Lord and began to serve other gods. For Israel, it meant worshipping other gods. Establishing high places where sacrifices could be made to pagan deities. Creating and fashioning idols just like all the other nations. We fall into this same trap as well. We worship the gods of money and sex and power and success. We sacrifice time and talent and treasure and even our families to pursue these things. In either case, God's bride is now playing the whore. Literally taking the gifts God has given her and giving them away to idols. "How sick is your heart, declares the Lord God, because you did all these things, the deeds of a brazen prostitute..." (Ezekiel 16:30)

Therefore God brings judgment on His bride. "For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God..." (1 Peter 4:17) God will not spare her and in fact, holds her to a higher standard. Higher than Samaria. Higher than Sodom. Higher than the happy pagans that live around us. "Bear your disgrace, you also, for you have intervened on behalf of your sisters. Because of your sins in which you acted more abominably than they, they are more in the right than you. So be ashamed, you also, and bear

your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous.” (Ezekiel 16:52) God disciplines those He loves out of a desire to see us cleansed from sin and brought to glory. "My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by Him. For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son or daughter whom He receives." (Hebrews 12:5-6) His desire is for His bride to return home. To remain faithful and true. To remember from whence she came and to honor her Divine Husband for all He has done. Why? So the world may again marvel at the intimacy of their relationship. “For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?” (Deuteronomy 4:7)

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

Readings for tomorrow: None

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**September 5, 2022**  
**Divine Justice**

Readings for today: Ezekiel 17-20

Today's reading poses a very important question. Actually, it's more of an accusation. "You say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.'" (Ezekiel 18:25) If we're honest, this is a question we've all asked at one time or another. Perhaps even an accusation we've leveled at God at different points of our lives. Frankly, this isn't new. God's people have been wrestling with God over this issue for centuries. They look at their history. They look at their circumstances. They ponder their suffering. Because of the difficulties they face in their lives, they wonder how God could allow such things to happen. They wonder how a good God could allow evil to flourish. They wonder how a loving God could stand by and watch His people endure such pain. They wonder how a gracious God could be so demanding. I hear it all the time and I sympathize for I've wrestled deeply with this issue myself.

Here's the hard but honest truth. From the very beginning, we've been avoiding the responsibilities that come with being made in God's image and being given a mandate to care for all creation. Instead of humbly acknowledging the ways we have failed, we too often try to find someone else to blame. Instead of looking in the mirror and coming to grips with the depths of our self-centeredness, we look to God and try to blame-shift. We seek an escape from the natural consequences of our sinful behavior by pretending the issue is somehow with God... "He made me this way", "He set up the world like this", "He is the one who allows evil to flourish..."

God will have none of it. "Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it; for the injustice that he has done he shall die. Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life. Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?" (Ezekiel 18:25-29) God makes it very clear that He will not allow us to skirt our responsibilities. Our sin is the root of the evil we see in the world. Our rebellion is the reason for our difficult circumstances. Our refusal to follow the ways of God is why we face such suffering and hardship with so little hope. It is not God's arm that is shortened or God's strength that has failed or God's justice that has let us down. The failure is our own.

Thankfully, God is merciful. He is gracious. He loves us despite our sin. Listen to His words from Ezekiel 18 and be encouraged. "Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die." Your soul is God's. Whether you believe or disbelieve. Whether you are good or evil. Whether you feel worthy or unworthy. Your soul is God's. He holds you in His hand. "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." You are only responsible for you. You are not responsible for the sins of your parents or friends or extended family. You are not at the mercy of your family's dysfunction or the baggage from your broken history. You are not simply the product of your genetic makeup. If you are a Christian, you are a rational, spiritual creature who is endowed by Christ with His Spirit to make godly choices. "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" God doesn't delight in your pain. God is not immune to your suffering. God does not derive a sadistic pleasure from the death of anyone, including the wicked. He loves everyone He made in His image and desires all to be saved and come to

a knowledge of His truth. "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live." What God desires is NOT perfection but repentance. Humility rather than pride. A broken and contrite heart, God will never despise.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 21-24

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**September 6, 2022**  
**We Want Justice!**

Readings for today: Ezekiel 21-24

I remember my first trip into inner city Trenton, NJ. My wife and I were going there to spend time with mentors and friends. When we arrived, we parked outside their row home and I watched as my friend stood on his front stoop and made eye contact with several different people on the block. When we went inside, I asked him what he was doing. He told me he was letting the people he lived among know I was under his protection. He lived in an impoverished neighborhood plagued by drugs and gang violence. Trenton has one of the highest homicide rates in the country. Every evening at 5PM during the week, the city empties out as government employees flee to the suburbs. When we lived nearby in grad school, there were very few restaurants. No hotels. No night life to speak of. It was a city desperate for redevelopment but unfortunately the political leadership was notoriously corrupt.

I was reminded of Trenton when I read our passage today from Ezekiel. Like I said yesterday, we struggle when we get to the prophetic books of the Bible because of the harsh judgment of God. But then you start to catalog all the sins Israel has committed over the years. All the suffering she has caused. All the violence and corruption and idolatry. Add it all up and it starts to make sense. Chapter 22 begins with a question from God to his prophet. Essentially, is Jerusalem worthy of judgment? God's answer? I will declare to her all her abominations...

She is a "a city that sheds blood in her midst, so that her time may come, and that makes idols to defile herself!" (Ezekiel 22:3) Her leaders are corrupt. They are violent men who shed innocent blood. "Behold, the princes of Israel in you, every one according to his power, have been bent on shedding blood. (Ezekiel 22:6) The commandments are ignored. Father and mother are not honored. The Sabbath is not kept. The worship of the Living God is impure. (Ezekiel 22:7-8) Furthermore, the immigrant and refugee are exploited. The poor and fatherless and widows are not cared for. Bribery and extortion are common. (Ezekiel 22:7, 12) Sexual immorality is rampant. (Ezekiel 22:9-11) The priests of God commit sacrilege and heresy. They no longer follow the ritual purity rites set up by God to govern worship. The prophets of God tell lies. They embrace deceit. They whitewash the sins of God's people. The princes of God are greedy. Selfish. Power-hungry. Tyrants who only care about themselves. (Ezekiel 22: 26-28) And the people follow their lead.

No wonder God is angry! The people He called by His name and set apart for Himself to be a light to the Gentiles and a witness to the nations have now become an abomination. They commit sin with impunity. They have no shame. God has warned them over and over again and has been ignored. Now the sword of God's judgment will come. Israel will reap what she has rightfully sown. She will suffer God's judgment as He seeks to purify her once again. "Son of man, the house of Israel has become dross to me; all of them are bronze and tin and iron and lead in the furnace; they are dross of silver. Therefore thus says the Lord God: Because you have all become dross, therefore, behold, I will gather you into the midst of Jerusalem. As one gathers silver and bronze and iron and lead and tin into a furnace, to blow the fire on it in order to melt it, so I will gather you in my anger and in my wrath, and I will put you in and melt you. I will gather you and blow on you with the fire of my wrath, and you shall be melted in the midst of it. As silver is melted in a furnace, so you shall be melted in the midst of it, and you shall know that I am the Lord; I have poured out my wrath upon you." (Ezekiel 22:18-22)

The important thing to note here is that God's judgment is not an end in itself. It is always the means to a greater end which is to separate the dross from the silver. To refine all the impurities out of God's

people. God places us in the “furnace of affliction” (Isaiah 48:10) in order to make us pure as gold. I know this may be a new thought to some of you. You aren’t used to hearing things like “God disciplines those He loves” but it’s true. I know when I look back at the hardest and most difficult times of my own life - growing up in an alcoholic home, losing my firstborn son, watching my career implode, almost losing my marriage, etc. - I can see how God used those times to expose some things that I needed to surrender to Him. He exposed my sin. He exposed my selfishness. He exposed my pride. He exposed my addictions. He brought all those things to the light of day so they could be dealt with once and for all at the cross. For it is at the cross of Christ where God’s judgment and God’s mercy meet. Surrender your will to Him, friends, so you may experience His mercy and grace today!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 25-28

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September 7, 2022  
**Never Rejoice at Another Person's Fall**

Readings for today: Ezekiel 25-28

Several years ago, I was hanging out with a group of middle school boys. It was our first small group of the year. The lesson happened to be on Genesis 1:27 where God describes how He made human beings in His image. Male and female. Black and white. Rich and poor. All bearing the signature stamp of their Creator. We talked through the implications of this passage for each of them as they started school. Within the first few days their peer groups had already formed. The pecking order quickly established. They knew who was popular and who was not. They knew who the jocks were and the nerds. They knew the kids who struggled and those who seemed to always succeed. Then we flipped over to Galatians 3:26-28 where the Apostle Paul challenges us to move beyond our social categories and divisions and embrace one another in Christ. After the conversation, we discussed how we could put this principle into practice. Each boy was challenged to think of a student they knew that they struggled to love. It could be someone they knew was lonely. Someone they knew had few friends. Perhaps even someone they made fun of or even bullied on occasion. The accountability point for that particular week was to approach that student and find a way to love them concretely in the name of Jesus. Sit with them at lunch. Hang out with them at recess. Invite them over to hang.

As Christians, we do not celebrate the struggles of others. We do not rejoice at their fall. We do not take secret pleasure in their pain. Ezekiel makes it clear that people who do such things will be judged. Either as individuals or as nations. The nations surrounding Israel watched them struggle and eventually fall into ruin. They rejoiced when it happened. Threw parties. Danced in the streets. They even took the opportunity to pile on for their own revenge. Ammon. Moab. Seir. Edom. Philistia. Tyre. All of them are guilty. All of them are judged. Perhaps Tyre most harshly. God even compares her king to Satan. "You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle; and crafted in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created they were prepared. You were an anointed guardian cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till unrighteousness was found in you. In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence in your midst, and you sinned; so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, and I destroyed you, O guardian cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire. Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor. I cast you to the ground..." (Ezekiel 28:12-17) No one escapes God's righteous judgment. No one gets a pass. Not Satan. Not the kings of this world. Not pastors like me. Not middle school boys like the ones in my small group that year.

The reality is when we rejoice in wrongdoing, celebrate the fall of others, or take pleasure in another person's pain and heartbreak; we are operating under the influence of the evil one. He loves watching God's people tear each other apart. He loves creating divisions and factions. He loves to isolate and attack and devour and destroy. As Christians, we must resist this temptation. We must resist the temptation to label others as our enemies. We must resist the temptation to make fun of others at their expense. We must resist the temptation to wound and hurt and pile on when someone's down. Instead, we must lift them up. We must encourage. We must stand at their side. Show compassion. Grieve with them and for them. Our hearts must break with their hearts. This is what it means to be Christ to others. To show Christ to others. To love Christ as He has loved us.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 29-32

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**September 8, 2022**  
**No Other Gods**

Readings for today: Ezekiel 29-32

The original temptation that caused humanity to fall into sin was “you shall be like God.” The first commandment given to Israel on Mt. Sinai says “You shall have no other gods before Me.” The greatest commandment according to Jesus is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.” In the Book of Revelation, God describes Himself as “the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.” From the opening chapters of Genesis to the closing chapters of Revelation, God makes it very clear that there is only one God. He alone is worthy of our worship. He alone deserves our praise and adoration. He alone demands our complete and total allegiance. He alone is to be obeyed. When we violate this fundamental truth, we place ourselves in grave peril for God will not be mocked. He will not share His glory with another. He will allow no rival to ascend His throne.

Tragically, this doesn't stop humanity from making the attempt. Over and over again, we seek to scale the heights of heaven. Over and over again, we seek to make a name for ourselves. Beginning with the Tower of Babel, every great human civilization sets out to be like God. The kings and pharaohs and emperors and prime ministers and presidents style themselves as gods. They believe they can do no wrong. They believe might makes right. They believe they hold the authority over life and death. They believe they deserve to be worshipped and praised and adored. Sure, it may not be as obvious in the modern world as it was in the ancient world where a king like Pharaoh literally declared himself a god but you see some of the same signs nonetheless. Humanity making the same mistake over and over again. Falling for the same temptation over and over again. Listen to the litany laid out in Ezekiel...

“Egypt is delivered to the sword; drag her away, and all her multitudes.”

“Assyria is there, and all her company, its graves all around it, all of them slain, fallen by the sword...”

“Elam is there, and all her multitude around her grave; all of them slain, fallen by the sword, who went down uncircumcised into the world below, who spread their terror in the land of the living; and they bear their shame with those who go down to the pit.”

“Meshech-Tubal is there, and all her multitude, her graves all around it, all of them uncircumcised, slain by the sword; for they spread their terror in the land of the living.”

“Edom is there, her kings and all her princes, who for all their might are laid with those who are killed by the sword; they lie with the uncircumcised, with those who go down to the pit.”

“The princes of the north are there, all of them, and all the Sidonians, who have gone down in shame with the slain, for all the terror that they caused by their might; they lie uncircumcised with those who are slain by the sword, and bear their shame with those who go down to the pit.”

“When Pharaoh sees them, he will be comforted for all his multitude, Pharaoh and all his army, slain by the sword, declares the Lord God.” (Ezekiel 32:20, 22, 24, 26, 29-31)

One after the other, the great civilizations of the ancient near east decline and fall under God's mighty hand. The same thing will eventually happen to Babylon and Persia and Greece and Rome and Germany and England and Russia and America. Every human civilization that seeks greatness and

wealth and power and immorality will one day fall. This is God's promise. "Therefore thus says the Lord God: Because it towered high and set its top among the clouds, and its heart was proud of its height, I will give it into the hand of a mighty one of the nations. He shall surely deal with it as its wickedness deserves. I have cast it out. Foreigners, the most ruthless of nations, have cut it down and left it. On the mountains and in all the valleys its branches have fallen, and its boughs have been broken in all the ravines of the land, and all the peoples of the earth have gone away from its shadow and left it. On its fallen trunk dwell all the birds of the heavens, and on its branches are all the beasts of the field. All this is in order that no trees by the waters may grow to towering height or set their tops among the clouds, and that no trees that drink water may reach up to them in height. For they are all given over to death, to the world below, among the children of man, with those who go down to the pit." (Ezekiel 31:10-14)

Why is God so jealous for His name? It's because of His great love for us. God knows the kingdoms of this world are corrupt. God knows how often they fail. God knows they are not ultimately trustworthy. He knows they are not safe. It's why He calls His people to place their trust only in Him. He is God. He is eternal. Unchangeable. Immovable. Immeasurable. Immortal. Indestructible. Imperishable. He alone can be depended on. He alone can save us from the powers of sin and death. He alone has the power and authority to rule and reign over all He has made. He alone is God.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 33-36

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**September 9, 2022**  
**The Gift of God's Spirit**

Readings for today: Ezekiel 33-36

Today's reading brings with it a cascade of images. Watchmen. Shepherds. Scattered sheep. New covenants. Ancient prophecies. Culminating in one of the most beautiful promises in the Old Testament...the gift of God's Spirit. Is there a thread that ties this all together? Or does God simply have too many tabs open in His browser? Is there a common tie or theme or guiding principle at work here? Or is God doing His best "Jackson Pollock" impersonation? Sometimes when we read the Old Testament, especially in the prophetic literature, it can feel scattershot. Like a bunch of random events some scribe collated at a later date, one not necessarily having to do with any other.

Today, however, is different. There is a thread that weaves itself throughout these chapters. It builds toward a beautiful crescendo where God Himself promises to invade time and space to perform heart transplant surgery on His people. It all starts with this idea of the "watchman." Watchmen were essential in the ancient world. They stood guard on the walls of the village. Day and night they faithfully manned their posts. Never resting. Never sleeping. They bore a great responsibility. The safety of their people rested on their shoulders. Should an enemy invade, it was the watchman who would give warning. Should natural disaster strike, it was the watchman who often saw it coming. When the watchman gave warning, it was up to the people to respond. To take action. God tells Ezekiel he is to act as a watchman for Israel. To sound the warning when he sees them falling into sin. To point out where they are wandering off the path of righteousness. To challenge them to turn from their sin and return to God. If Ezekiel is faithful, he will potentially save his people. If he is faithless and refuses to speak up, he will have failed his people and their blood will be on his hands.

Why such a drastic call to action? Because the shepherds God has placed over His people are corrupt. Instead of caring for the sheep, they actually feed off them. Instead of protecting the sheep, they let them wander all over the place. Instead of seeking those that are lost, they abandon them to their fate. These faithless shepherds are only concerned with themselves. They've grown fat and lazy. They use the sheep to further their own purposes. Their own agenda. To enrich themselves and make their names great.

God looks down on His people. They are scattered and suffering. Lonely and afraid. Lost and wandering. Wounded and weak. Injured and hurting. And this pierces God's heart. So He takes action. "For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out...I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness...I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land...I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land...I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice." (Ezekiel 34:11-16) It's an unbelievable promise. God renewing His gracious and glorious covenant with Israel!

Why would God do such a thing? For the sake of His great name. "Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you

have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.” (Ezekiel 36:22-23) Remember, God’s primary concern from creation to redemption to final glorification is His own glory. His own honor. His own reputation. God will make His name famous on the earth. God will make Himself known among the nations. God’s name will be lifted up! God will be worshipped in the way He deserves and the way He demands! One day, every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth! And what’s happening here in Ezekiel is just a foretaste of what’s to come.

So how will God make this happen? How will He take a stubborn and rebellious and sinful people and turn them into worshippers? Listen to what God Himself says He will do, “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.” (Ezekiel 36:25-28) Isn’t this amazing? God is not content to sit up in heaven and wait for us to get it right. He isn’t going to sit back and watch as we work our tails off to get to Him. He isn’t going to stand by as we struggle and suffer and fight the forces of darkness that attack us on every side. No. He WILL rescue! He WILL redeem! He WILL save! He lifts us up. Holds us in His arms. Bathes us in His grace. Transplants our broken hearts. Infuses us with His very Spirit. Gives us new desires. New appetites. New loves. And so we find ourselves walking in God’s ways. Obeying His rules. Living by His commands. Not because we have to but because we want to! Not because we’re forced to but because we long to show our devotion to our Heavenly Father! Not out of fear or anxiety of what might happen if we make a mistake but from a deep sense of peace and security that flows from our confidence in the unconditional love of God.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 37-40

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September 10, 2022

## Can Dry Bones Live Again?

Readings for today: Ezekiel 37-40

Ezekiel 37 and the valley of dry bones is one of my favorite passages in all the Bible. I love how God uses Ezekiel to literally raise the dead to new life. In a sense, every time I get up to preach this is my prayer. I ask God to awaken hearts that may have become dry and stale and bring new life through the preaching of His Word and the movement of His Spirit.

Of course, the power to raise the dead to new life doesn't come from me. And this is of great comfort! Ezekiel was simply called to prophesy. To speak the words God gave him. This was his act of faith. To declare the goodness and glory of God to a valley full of scattered bones. We never know what season we will find ourselves in. Some are born into seasons of revival where the church is vibrant and growing and seeking the Lord with all its heart. Some are born into seasons where the church is dying and struggling and enslaved to fear and sin. Ezekiel was called to be a prophet in exile. At a time in Israel's life where it seemed all hope had been lost. Their beautiful city had been destroyed. Their Temple razed to the ground. Their land conquered and occupied by foreign invaders. All the promises of God seemed to have come to an end. But in the midst of this national catastrophe, God brings a word of hope through His prophet. Ezekiel prophesies to the dry bones of Israel and a great "rattling" is heard. The scattered bones come together. Muscles and tissue and sinews form. The bodies rise. A great multitude as far as the eye could see. So Ezekiel prophesies again and the Spirit of God begins to blow. The dead bodies come alive! And why does God perform such a miracle? What is His primary aim and goal? Listen to what He tells Ezekiel. "And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord." (Ezekiel 37:13-14)

Now consider our own spiritual condition. The church in Europe and America is dying. For far too long, it has tolerated sin. Think of the scandals rocking the Roman Catholic Church or the number of influential Protestant pastors whose moral failings have been exposed. Think of the number of churches who have lost sight of their mission in their arguments over styles of church music or the color of the carpet in the sanctuary. Think of the number of churches who have exchanged the truth of the gospel for the lies of our culture. Think of the number of churches who are closing their doors every day in communities across our country. It is heartbreaking. It can seem hopeless. I close my eyes and it's almost like I can picture the valley filling up with the bones of these formerly great congregations.

Now let's make it personal. As a pastor, I meet so many Christians who are struggling. Suffering. Dying spiritually. Their connection to God is tenuous at best. They've made choices and those choices have taken them far from God. They no longer spend time in His Word. No longer spend time with Him in prayer. No longer gather to worship with His people. Their everyday lives are filled with sinful pursuits they don't even recognize because they do not give God a second thought. Their hearts are not broken by the things that break God's heart. Instead, they spend their lives chasing their own happiness. Fulfilling their own wants and desires. They jump from church to church, never really putting down roots. Never really building authentic community because to do so would require them to die to themselves. It would require them to forgive past hurts. Look past the sins of others. Endure the heartache and pain that is part and parcel of the journey of building deep friendships. The end result of all this is spiritual death. This way of life ends in a valley of dry bones. But thankfully, even there, there is hope! For God can meet us in our valleys just as surely as He met Ezekiel! God can raise us to new life in these valleys just as surely as He did the people of Israel! With God, hope is never completely lost!

**Readings for tomorrow: None**

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**September 12, 2022**  
**The Glorious Return of the Lord**

Readings for today: Ezekiel 41-44

It's hard to imagine how Ezekiel must have felt when he saw the Lord returning to the Temple. The only thing close to it might be watching the memorial being built after the Towers fell in New York City. To visit Ground Zero or to see the lights shining on a clear night reminds us all to never forget what happened on that terrible day. I still remember sitting in my car, waiting to make a left turn onto Alexander Road from Canal Pointe Blvd, as I headed into Princeton for school that morning. Classes were cancelled. Work was suspended. We all watched in horror as the events unfolded. My wife Kristi remembers being at school when the news came down and scrambling to figure out if any of the parents of her kids had been trapped in the towers as they fell. One of my good friends was mobilized as a National Guardsman and spent the next year serving as a chaplain at the site where they took the remains of those who had been killed so they could be identified. The experience was so traumatic for him that he ended up in therapy himself for almost a year. Another friend of mine was serving as the senior pastor of 5th Avenue Presbyterian Church at the time and when the towers fell, he donned his clerical robe, threw open the doors of his sanctuary, and ran out into the streets to usher people into safety. Living in such close proximity to New York meant we knew people personally who experienced the loss of loved ones. Lisa Beamer, whose husband Todd lost his life heroically in the charge to retake Flight 93, went to church literally a few miles away. As terrible as that day was for so many, it is equally if not more powerful to watch our nation memorialize those who fell. Millions visit the memorial and museum each year to pay their respects. It is a powerful witness and testimony to the resilient heart of the American people.

Now multiply 9/11 many times over. Imagine not only the Towers going down but planes flying into the Capitol building in Washington DC or the White House. Imagine tanks rolling down the highways of our country. Imagine bombs being dropped on every major city. Imagine armies burning and destroying everything in their path. Imagine America in ruins. Imagine living in exile in some foreign nation for decades, wondering if you will ever return home. Now imagine a prophet coming to you and laying out the exact dimensions of a new Capitol being built. A new White House. A new Supreme Court building. Imagine that prophet rolling out the blueprints of every national monument and showing them to you. Imagine him telling you a time is coming soon when you will return and America will be reborn. Can you imagine your excitement and joy? The feeling of national pride that would swell in your heart?

“Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east. And the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory. And the vision I saw was just like the vision that I had seen when he came to destroy the city, and just like the vision that I had seen by the Chebar canal. And I fell on my face. As the glory of the Lord entered the temple by the gate facing east, the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the Lord filled the temple.” (Ezekiel 43:1-5) It is impossible to overstate the joy Ezekiel must have felt as he sees this vision of the Lord's return. As painful as it was for him to see the Lord leaving the Temple in his earlier visions, it is now equally exciting to witness the Lord's return. God had not forgotten His people! God had not abandoned His promises! God would prove faithful! No wonder he fell on his face.

Life is often hard. There are moments, even seasons, where we feel like everything has come crashing down around us. We lose our job. Homes go into foreclosure. Relationships break down in divorce. We

experience the sudden, tragic loss of someone we love. There is so much in this world that brings us pain and heartbreak. It can even feel at times like the Lord has abandoned us. Ridden off on his chariot somewhere far away, never to return. Don't believe the lie! God is faithful. He is true. He is steadfast in His love. He will never forsake or abandon you. He is with you. His glory is your sanctuary and your rearguard. If you walk by faith. If you trust in Him. If you surrender to His will and His ways. He will provide for you. He will restore the years the locusts have eaten. He will rebuild the ruins of your life. He will bring forth new growth and new life from the barren ground. This is His promise and He will never fail!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 45-48

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**September 13, 2022**  
**Living Waters**

Readings for today: Ezekiel 45-48

I love Ezekiel's vision today. Water flowing from the Temple of God. Beginning as a trickle but becoming a mighty river, flowing southeast out of Jerusalem towards the Dead Sea. The region around the Sea is a wasteland. A desert. A void. A place where nothing grows. I've been there. It's desolate. And yet, as the river reaches the sea, this amazing miracle takes place! Trees begin to grow on either side. Their fruit providing food and sustenance to all. Their leaves never wither or fade. The water itself teems with life. Fish of every kind find a home there. As the waters reach the Sea, they bring it from death to life. The saltwater turns fresh and it begins to produce a hundredfold. Yes, there are still reminders of the former days. Still reminders of the death that once reigned here. The marshes and swamps retain their salty character but those simply serve as witnesses to the miracle of resurrection that has taken place!

For the Christian, we recognize the prophetic nature of Ezekiel's vision. Many centuries later, the Apostle Peter will actually stand on the steps of the Temple and preach the gospel for the first time. The Holy Spirit moved powerfully through his words and 3000 gave their lives to Jesus Christ. Along the very stairs where Peter most likely preached are the ceremonial mikvehs where Jewish believers would wash before going into worship. You can see them today. The 3000 who were saved were probably baptized in those very waters! What began as a trickle soon became a mighty river as the Spirit moved in the hearts of those early believers. From 20,000 at the end of the 1st century to over 20 million some two hundred years later to over 3 billion today; the river of the gospel of Jesus Christ just gets deeper and wider as it flows!

But even this is just a foretaste of what's to come! In the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John receives a vision that sounds eerily similar to what Ezekiel received. "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations... The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price." (Revelation 22:1-2, 17) Friends, God is still on the move! Even after all these centuries, the living waters are still flowing. Lives are still being changed by the gospel. God refuses to remain in His Temple. His grace moves out into the wastelands of our world. Into the darkest places where death reigns. And His grace brings life. Hope. Joy. Peace. Churches sprout up along its banks, bearing the fruit of the Spirit to sustain the nations. As they seek Christ themselves, they find their leaves never wither. The world itself is renewed. Restored. Redeemed. Where O Death is now thy sting? Where O Death is now thy victory? The Living Water that Christ offers us fills the void! It becomes a spring of water welling up continually in our souls. Healing our hurts. Easing our pain. Comforting our grief. Sustaining us until the day when Christ will come again to wipe away every tear and make all things new.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 1-3

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**September 14, 2022**  
**Living God's Truth**

Readings for today: Daniel 1-3

“In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect...” (1 Peter 3:15)

Daniel is one of my favorites. He is a man sold out to God. No matter what life throws at him, he never once seems to waver. When he was a young man, he was carted off into exile in Babylon. A traumatic, painful experience. Once he arrived in Babylon, he was identified as a young man of promise and removed from his family. Sequestered in the king's household, he began training as a wise man. Someone who would counsel the king on the most important matters. Someone who would serve the empire and seek to expand its influence and power. One can easily imagine the internal struggle Daniel must have felt. How does he serve God faithfully while counseling one of the great tyrants in history? How does he speak God's truth to a pagan power? How does he maintain his integrity even as he counsels a king whose ego is out of control?

The challenges start early. As part of his training, he is presented with unclean food to eat. Right off the bat, he has a choice to make. Will he trust God or will he compromise his convictions? Here it is critical to note how Daniel responds. It will become the pattern for the rest of his life. “But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king." Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, "Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see." (Daniel 1:8-13) First and foremost, Daniel resolves to remain faithful to God's Law. He will not eat unclean food. At the same time, he recognizes his convictions put the chief eunuch in a tough position. If Daniel and his friends refuse to eat and start to suffer physically, the eunuch is going to be punished so Daniel comes up with a plan. Essentially, let us do it God's way for ten days and then compare us with the rest of the group. If we don't measure up, we'll do it your way. It's a brilliant approach. Daniel remains faithful to God. He is able to share with the eunuch the reason for his hope. And he treats the man with gentleness and respect.

Fast forward a few years. Now Daniel has taken his place among the wise men of Babylon. A decree goes out that everyone is to be killed because no one can pass the king's test. Once again, Daniel approaches the captain of the guard with gentleness and respect. He asks for an audience with the king. He trusts God to reveal the mystery in prayer. And when given his audience, he testifies to the greatness and power of God and the king humbles himself before him.

A few more years pass. The king grows so insecure he decides to build a monument to himself and demand everyone fall down in worship before it. It's the height of arrogance. Daniel doesn't appear in this story but his colleagues do. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego follow his example. Confronted with a situation which would force them to break the second commandment, they refuse to bow down in worship and instead stand faithful. The king is furious but the men answer him with grace and truth. "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we

serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." (Daniel 3:16-18) They are thrown into a furnace of fire. The king and his courtiers watch, waiting for them to be consumed. An incredible miracle happens as God Himself appears and delivers them from death. The result is again the humbling of the king. "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God." (Daniel 3:28)

Daniel is an amazing example of faith to us all. In the way he lives his life, he shows us how to live and engage our increasingly complex, non-Christian world in a faithful way. We do not have to relinquish our faith in Christ to serve in politics or business or education or any other field for that matter. Holding onto Christ in our hearts, we do have to be prepared to give an answer for the hope we have in Him. People will ask. They may wonder why we do the things we do or refuse to act in ways that are dishonest or morally compromised. We may be attacked for our faith at times. Through it all, we are not to respond with violence or anger or fight for our "rights" but instead stand firm with gentleness and respect. We are not to resort to the underhanded ways of this world to accomplish the will of God. We must not use the ways of this world to achieve the purposes of God. Instead, we must let go and let God act as He chooses. Use us as He pleases. Place our lives and our future in His hands.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 4-6

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**September 15, 2022**  
**Power of Prayer**

Readings for today: Daniel 4-6

Daniel was given a powerful position within Babylonian society. He had the ear of the king. He was known for his wisdom and godly character. He never sought personal gain. Never used political maneuvering for his own personal benefit. Never sought power or privilege or higher status. His allegiance was to a much higher authority. He lived for God alone and this made his position unassailable. When his political enemies came after him, they found nothing to pin on him. They dug up no dirt. They found no one who would speak against Daniel. Daniel's deep faith led to true freedom. He was free to speak God's truth to Nebuchadnezzar. Free to confront him on his pride and arrogance. Free to give him the bad news about the meaning of his dreams. Daniel was free to call Nebuchadnezzar to repent which he eventually did.

“King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you! It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me. How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation...At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?...Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.” (Daniel 4:1-3, 34-35, 37)

Where did Daniel find such freedom? Prayer. He humbly presented himself before the Lord multiple times a day. He came before the Lord with praise. He confessed his sins. He lifted up his needs and the needs of his people. And I am convinced Daniel prayed fervently for the kings he served like Nebuchadnezzar. Sometimes it is tempting to think we have it bad in our country. To think our leaders have reached a level of corruption that places them beyond the grace of God. Nothing could be further from the truth! Nebuchadnezzar was one of the world's great tyrants. When Peter and Paul talked about honoring and praying for the emperor, they were talking about Nero of Rome. Christians throughout the centuries and throughout the world today suffer under the harshest of regimes and still they pray for their leaders. Can we do any less?

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 7-9

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**September 16, 2022**  
**Visions and Dreams**

Readings for today: Daniel 7-9

What the book of Daniel is most famous for are the visions Daniel sees in the night. So much ink has been spilt trying to interpret the meaning of these dreams. Are they historical? Referring to past events and past kingdoms that have come and gone? Do they tell the future? Of a time when the great Enemy will rise and attack God's people? Are they both? Can we learn from what has happened in the past and look for those same signs to take place in the future? And what does it all mean for the Christian in 21st century America? How does it all relate to our daily lives?

I think we often miss the forest for the trees when it comes to reading Scripture. We get so wrapped up in the details. So lost in the weeds. And we lose sight of the overarching message God has for us. Daniel and his people are in exile. They have experienced national trauma on a level we simply cannot grasp or imagine. Their pain and suffering is real and terrible. Their hopes and dreams have been crushed out of existence. Ground under the heel of a merciless pagan empire. Everything they once held dear has been destroyed. These are the circumstances in which God has placed Daniel. He has been a counselor to pagan kings. He has served foreign rulers. He has done all he can to embrace the call God placed on His people back in Jeremiah to "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) And he has prospered. He has been given power and authority. He has access and influence. He has wealth and privilege. He is considered one of the greatest wise men the empire has ever produced. But one thing continues to set Daniel apart...his great faith.

Daniel never loses sight of God. Never loses hope in a future restoration where God will act to deliver His people once again. Daniel trusts God. Daniel is faithful to God. At great personal risk, Daniel has demonstrated this faith over and over again. Lions. Fiery furnaces. Under threat of torture and death. Daniel has seen it all and done it all and not only survived but thrived. And now God is again visiting him with visions and dreams. He is showing him the future. Kings and empires will rise and fall. The pain and suffering they inflict will be great. The fear they will engender will cause many to flee. Safety and comfort will be in short supply. But over it all, there is this promise. God is in control. God is on the move. God is bringing human history to a predetermined end with Christ taking His seat in glory and His kingdom shall never end.

"As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened...I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." (Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14) Forget the four great beasts. Forget the visions of lions and eagles and bears. Rams and goats thundering towards one another across the earth. Forget the terrifying beast with ten horns or the little horn with the big mouth. The focus of Daniel's vision is on the One called the Ancient of Days. The One who reigns and rules over it all. Pure as driven snow. Engulfed in holy fire. Tens of thousands at his beck and call. He judges the earth. He judges kings and rulers. He holds all dominion and power in His hand. And He calls to the Son of Man. Out of the clouds of heaven comes

the Christ and He is given all authority on heaven and on earth. All peoples and nations and tribes and tongues shall serve him. His kingdom shall never end. This is the main point of the vision Daniel receives. God letting his beloved prophet know He is not done. There is still hope. There will come a day when Christ shall come and all things shall be set right and made new.

And what happens to us on that great day? Listen to how Daniel describes it, “And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him.” (Daniel 7:27) We get to share in this glory! We get to share in this victory! When Christ comes again in glory, we will be given dominion and power and authority to reign and rule at His side and under His Lordship! There will be no more sin. No more evil. No more crying. No more pain. No more suffering. No more fear. For God Himself will be our God and we shall be His people! This is the great hope of the gospel! The great hope sealed by Christ’s death and resurrection! An empty tomb bears witness! Millions upon millions throughout history all stand to give their testimony! Christ has died! Christ has risen! Christ will come again!

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 10-12

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September 17, 2022  
Apocalypse

Readings for today: Daniel 10-12

Apocalypse means “revelation.” It’s so common in the Bible that we literally refer to an entire genre as “apocalyptic writing.” Books like Daniel, Ezekiel, Revelation, etc. all fall under this category. They typically involve a prophet being given a vision of the future which they then communicate to God’s people. It often involves dramatic imagery that is notoriously difficult to interpret as they are drawing on ancient near east categories of thought. But the genre serves an important purpose. First and foremost, it sounds a note of judgment against the powers and principalities of this world. Second, it sounds a note of comfort for God’s people by reminding them of God’s sovereign power and plan. Finally, it has a predictive element to it as it often foretells the future. This is certainly the case in Daniel 10-12. Here’s a brief timeline...

535 BC - Third year of Cyrus the Great’s reign. Daniel is now 85 years old and has been serving pagan kings for seventy years. Daniel’s grief is most likely the result of the conflict those who have returned from exile under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra are facing as they rebuild both Jerusalem and the Temple. Daniel fasts for three weeks but unbeknownst to him, a battle is taking place in the heavenly realm. Gabriel - most likely the identity of the angelic being who visits Daniel - is at war with Satan and his demonic forces and only prevails with the help of another archangel named Michael. Gabriel has been sent by God to comfort Daniel. To give him hope for the future. Hard times are coming. Terrifying times. Forces will be arrayed in heaven and on earth against God’s chosen people. Satan is seeking - as he always does - their complete eradication from the face of the earth. God, knowing what is to come, sends his angel to Daniel with a vision of the future so he can record it for future generations.

Three relatively minor kings follow Cyrus on throne. But the fourth referred to in Daniel 11 is Xerxes who ruled from 486-465 BC. His power and might was unrivaled at the time and as he seeks to expand his empire, he will provoke the might of Greece. After a number of years, Alexander the Great (336-323 BC) will unite the Greek into one empire and head east to destroy the Persians. Alexander dies tragically and his empire is then broken up into four pieces, ruled by four of his closest generals. The Ptolemaic (Southern king) faction goes to war with the Seleucids (Northern king) and their battle rages for generations with Israel as the primary “buffer state” in between. Eventually, a brutal tyrant named Antiochus Epiphanes IV will sweep down from the north and cause tremendous suffering for the people of God. “But he who comes against him shall do as he wills, and none shall stand before him. And he shall stand in the glorious land, with destruction in his hand.” (Daniel 11:16) He will even seek to place a statue of Zeus in the Holy of Holies (abomination of desolation mentioned in 11:31) which in turn gives rise to the Maccabean revolt detailed in the Old Testament Apocryphal books of 1st and 2nd Maccabees.

All of this is ancient history to us but it was still very much in the future for Daniel. As God unpacks for him what is to come, he sees tremendous suffering ahead for his people. “And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time...” Under the influence of Haman, Xerxes will try to kill every single Jewish man, woman, and child within the borders of his empire. You can read all about this in the book of Esther. The wars between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid factions will take a tremendous toll on both land and people as many of the battles are fought in and around the borders of Israel. Pagan kings will rape and pillage and burn what God’s people are trying to build. And the worst of them all - Antiochus Epiphanes IV - will literally torture and kill as many Jews

as possible. At the same time these conflicts are raging on earth, there is a battle going on in heaven. Michael and his forces are fighting Satan and his demons and though the battle is fierce, they will prevail just as God's people will prevail on earth. This is why Daniel closes his book with such hopeful words, "But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever." (Daniel 12:1-3)

What's the relevance of all this history for God's people today? No matter what you are going through, know that God is with you. He is literally fighting at your side. He is bringing about His purposes and His will even amidst your hardships. He will send His messengers to serve you. To comfort you. To bless you. He will bring you peace. Though you may experience suffering for a time, He will preserve your life. In fact, He has a reward waiting for you in His heavenly Kingdom. There the righteous will shine like stars in the sky and will reign with Him forever. As Christians, we do not place our hope in the things of this world. We do not place our hope in what we can achieve in this world. We place our hope in God alone.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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**September 19, 2022**  
**Rebuilding**

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 36:22-23, Ezra 1-3

Our God specializes in rebuilding. He takes what is broken and He builds it back up. He takes what is ruined and He raises it back up. He takes what's been torn down and He pulls it back together. We see it over and over again throughout the Scriptures. After Adam and Eve sin, humanity descends into evil and chaos resulting in a great flood. God rebuilds using Noah. Humanity scatters in confusion at the Tower of Babel when their languages are confused. God rebuilds using Abram. Abram's descendants are enslaved and brutally oppressed in Egypt. God rebuilds using Moses. Israel plunges into complete anarchy at the end of the Book of Judges. God rebuilds using a prophet named Samuel and a king named David. Both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel fall into idolatry and are invaded. Their way of life destroyed and the people carried off into exile. God rebuilds using men like Nehemiah, Ezra, and Zerubbabel.

God rebuilds His Temple. God rebuilds His city. Most importantly, God rebuilds His people. He brings them back home just as He promised. He stirs the heart of a pagan king. A Persian named Cyrus who has destroyed the Babylonian empire. A royal decree is issued. Sacred elements are gathered. The people begin their journey back home. It's a massive undertaking involving thousands of people. Genealogical records are consulted to make sure the leaders all come from the correct lineage. Those eligible for the priesthood are identified. Those eligible to serve from the Levite tribe are identified. The direct descendants of the temple servants and royal servants are identified so they can all be restored to their rightful place, God leaving no detail left to chance. When they arrive, the first thing they do is rebuild the altar so they can worship. They keep the Feast of Booths according to God's Word. And most importantly, they lay the foundation of a new Temple which causes the old to weep and the young to praise. It had to be quite a moment.

Sadly sin will run its course once more. God's people will struggle and suffer yet again. As Daniel foretold, they will become a pawn in a much greater conflict as kingdoms clash over the legacy left by Alexander the Great. Eventually, Rome will rise and crush all in her path. Herod the Great will be installed as a "client king" set to rule over Israel. In a bid to curry favor, he will refurbish the Temple but his corruption and penchant for violence is evident to all. Tensions rise. Factions jockey for power and influence. Israel is a powderkeg ready to blow at anytime. And into this mess, a baby is born. A child grows up. His name is Jesus. Come to save His people from their sins. Come to rebuild the ancient ruins. Come to restore God's Kingdom once and for all. He dies on a cross. An apparent failure. But three days later, He rises from the dead in glorious triumph! Delivering the final, decisive blow to sin and evil in this world. Right before He ascends into heaven, He commissions His disciples. His follower. Those who would eventually be called "Christian" to carry on His rebuilding work. Armed with tools like compassion and grace and mercy, they are to go out into the world proclaiming the gospel to every tribe, tongue and nation. They are charged to build up a spiritual house. Equipping the saints for the work of God's Kingdom.

So what about you? Where is God at work in your life today? Where is He rebuilding? Where is He restoring? How is He using you to rebuild and restore others in His name?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 4-6

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**September 20, 2022**  
**Faith over Fear**

Readings for today: Ezra 4-6

I am turning fifty in March and as I think back over my life, I can point to many places where I faced a choice between fear or faith. When I chose the path of fear, I ended up in a dark place. I became anxious and depressed. I didn't sleep well. I lacked motivation. I made all kinds of excuses. I blamed everyone and everything around me. My heart was full of regrets. When I chose the path of faith, I found my spirits lifted. I experienced freedom. Peace that passed all understanding. I slept well. I woke up energized every morning. I took responsibility. I owned my successes and my failures. I had no regrets. No second guessing. My life was rich and full.

Our reading from Ezra today illustrates what God's people can do when they walk by faith. Sadly, it also illustrates what can happen when God's people walk in fear. "Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia." (Ezra 4:4-5) Zerubbabel and leaders of God's people had rightly rejected the offer of help from the people of the land for the god they worshipped was not the God of Israel. The people who had been resettled in the land after the Assyrian Empire wiped out the Northern Kingdom of Israel were a mixed group culled from different tribes and nations. They each brought their own ideas of god to the table and the result was a syncretized view of god that bore no resemblance to the God of Israel. If Zerubbabel allowed them to work alongside God's people as they rebuilt the Temple, there was a very real danger that the worship of God would become polluted and corrupt. The people of the land didn't take their rejection well. They embarked on a campaign of intimidation, threatening God's people with the very real consequences of opposing the might of the Persian Empire. The rebuilding work was hanging by a thread.

Thankfully, there were those who chose a different path. The path of faith. Haggai and Zechariah rose up to prophesy. Prophecy in this case had little to do with future-telling and more to do with truth-telling. They preached in the name of the God of Israel. Reminding God's people of God's sovereign power and authority. They encouraged the leaders of God's people to renew the work and trust in God's faithfulness and so the work resumed. It's important to note that the people still faced opposition. They still had to overcome all kinds of resistance. The factors that made them afraid in the first place didn't magically disappear. The difference now was that their focus was on God and not on all the obstacles standing in their way. Their eyes were fixed on God's mission rather than on all the reasons they couldn't or wouldn't be successful. Their faith gave them the strength to persevere through the challenges and setbacks rather than succumb to them.

What about you? Where does life find you today? As you think about the challenges you face in your own life, are you choosing the path of faith or the path of fear? Are you fixing your eyes on Jesus or do you find yourself consumed by all the stress and anxiety of your circumstances? Are you clinging to hope or are you paralyzed by doubt and indecision? Friends, God is with you! He promises to walk by your side every step of the way. Trust Him. Listen to Him. Lean not on your own understanding but in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths.

Readings for tomorrow: Haggai 1-2

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September 21, 2022  
**PUTTING GOD FIRST**

Readings for today: Haggai 1-2

I once had neighbors who tried to have it all. They both held lucrative jobs that paid six figures annually but caused them to travel most of the year. Their two kids were in competitive sports which held practices before and after school almost every day. Weekends were spent traveling to games all over the country. They rarely took a season off. They had a beautiful home they rarely slept in. Two new cars they rarely drove. They had so little time left over for friends or family or even each other. Sadly, it came as no surprise that they were soon divorced and their kids estranged. Their home sold. Their possessions divided. Both of them relocating to different parts of the country to start over.

I was reminded of their story when I read these words from Haggai today, “Now, therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes.” (Haggai 1:5-6) I meet people all the time who fall into this trap. They chase the world’s promises only to end up running on empty. They spend their lives acquiring possessions. Achieving success at all costs. Moving up the corporate ladder. Allowing their kids’ activities to eat up all of their extra time. The results are not pretty. Divorce. The breakdown of the family. A deep sense of isolation and loneliness. Superficial friendships. And definitely no room for God.

Haggai calls us to a different way. He calls us to put God first. To honor God with our time and our talent and our treasure. To give God the firstfruits of our labors not the leftovers. “Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord. You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld their dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors.” (Haggai 1:7-11) This passage isn’t really about the Temple. God doesn’t need us to build Him a home. It’s not like God lacks a place to live. What this is really about is the priority of our hearts. Do we put God first? Are we willing to take care of the things He cares about before we take care of the things we care about? Is He number one in our lives or is that just lip service? Do we order our lives around His ways and His commands or do we take Him for granted?

All of us have a chance today to “consider our ways.” All of us have an opportunity to sit down with our schedules and our bank statements and evaluate where we spend our time and money. All of us can take stock of where we put our energy and talent and resources. Do we spend time with God every day? Do we gather in person with God’s people every week? Are we building deep, spiritually friendships with those we love? Have we set apart time to serve Christ in His mission in the world? These questions serve as a kind of diagnostic that reveals the truest desires of our hearts.

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 1-7

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**September 22, 2022**  
**God is Gracious**

Readings for today: Zechariah 1-7

I love these words from Zechariah 1:2, “Return to Me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you.” It’s an amazingly gracious promise from an amazingly gracious God who never lets go of His promise to love us unconditionally. I have to admit I had a harder time appreciating passages like this when I was younger. Then I had kids of my own. ;-) And like any family, we’ve had our ups and our downs. There have been times when I have been so angry with them like when they lie to me or ignore my rules. But after I’ve cooled down, my deep love and affection for them always returns. I hold them in my arms. I let them know I will never stop loving them. Never stop fighting for them. Never give up on them. It’s in those moments that I often feel a tap on the shoulder from God letting me know that’s exactly how He feels about me.

God has always felt this way about His people. Psalms 30:5 says, “His anger lasts only a moment but His favor lasts a lifetime.” Numbers 14:18 says, “The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and forgiving sin and rebellion.” We see God’s gracious character on display over and over again in our reading today. “Therefore, thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; my house shall be built in it, declares the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. Cry out again, thus says the Lord of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity and the Lord will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.” (Zech. 1:16-17) “Jerusalem shall be inhabited as villages without walls, because of the multitude of people and livestock in it. And I will be to her a wall of fire all around, declares the Lord, and I will be the glory in her midst.” (Zech. 2:4) “Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. And the angel said to those who were standing before him, “Remove the filthy garments from him.” And to Joshua he said, “Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments.” (Zech. 3:3-4) Over and over again throughout these chapters, God speaks words of forgiveness and mercy and grace over His people. It’s truly amazing.

And what does God ask in return? He asks us to return to Him. To love Him with all our hearts, minds, and souls. To give Him the honor and glory due His name. What does such love and devotion look like in real life? In the day to day? Listen to what the Lord shares with Zechariah, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.” (Zech. 7:9-10) Returning to God means repenting of our sin and submitting our lives to Him. True repentance means embracing the ways of God in our lives and refusing to walk in the ways of this world. It means rejecting all the anger, all the hate, all the outrage, all the violence, all the neglect, all the greed, and all the selfishness that consumes so much of our time and attention and energy. It means living for something greater than ourselves...the Kingdom of God. It means loving someone other than ourselves...God and our neighbor. If we will do these things, God promises to dwell in our midst. The nations of the earth will experience revival and we will know the Lord of hosts is with us.

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 8-14

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**September 23, 2022**  
**God is with you**

Readings for today: Zechariah 8-14

I love these words from Zechariah today, “Thus says the Lord of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.” (Zech. 8:23) Can you imagine? Can you imagine a day where God’s people are so marked by His grace and peace and steadfast love and righteousness and holiness that people from every tribe, tongue, and nation on the earth would lay hold of us just to be in God’s presence? Can you imagine a day when the culture wars cease and the perpetual outrage cycle ends and people turn in exhaustion to those who walk humbly before their God? Can you imagine a day when we lay aside all our selfishness, greed, lust for power, and love of deception and instead cling to those who follow Jesus?

The Apostle Paul says, “All creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons and daughters of God.” (Romans 8:19) The whole world is looking forward to a day when the people of God, filled with the Spirit of God, will answer the call of God and walk in the ways of God to fulfill the mission of God. Read that sentence again to yourself. Read it slowly. Read it carefully. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, the message is clear. The world is waiting for you! The world is waiting for me! The world is groaning under the weight of sin, longing for release! Longing for freedom! Longing for the day when the people of God will take up their mandate once again to care for and steward all God has made, especially the creatures made in His image.

This is God’s plan. He reveals it clearly to His prophet. Over and over again, Zechariah declares the truth of God. Over and over again, Zechariah proclaims the promises of God. The Lord will return to Zion and dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. (Zech. 8:3) The Lord will save His people and gather them from the east and the west to live with Him in Jerusalem. (Zech. 8:7-8) The Lord will return in righteousness, humble and riding a donkey. (Zech. 9:9) The Lord will make His people like jewels in a crown. They shall shine like stars in the land. (Zech. 9:16) The Lord will protect His people. He will make the weak as strong as David. The strong like angels in all their glorious splendor. He will pour out a spirit of grace and mercy upon them. (Zech. 12:8-10) The Lord will do all these things and more as He establishes His reign and rule over all the earth. (Zech. 14:9)

Friends, the message to us could not be more clear. We are to live as citizens of heaven here on earth. The church is created to be a community of life in the midst of a culture of death. We are called to be salt and light in the world. We must live and love and serve and speak in such a way that those around us who do not yet know God will sense His Spirit within us. Today is an opportunity for us to walk with Christ. Today is an opportunity for us to be like Christ. Today is an opportunity for us to share Christ with those around us who do not yet know God so that they too may experience the joy and peace and grace that comes with His abiding presence.

Readings for tomorrow: Esther 1-5

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**September 24, 2022**  
**For Such A Time As This...**

Readings for today: Esther 1-5

Nothing is new under the sun. Humanity seems perpetually committed to “rinse, wash, repeat” their sinful ways. Today’s story from Esther could have just as easily been ripped from our own headlines. Lavish parties. Drunken orgies. Garish displays of wealth and excess. Sexual harassment. Abuse of power. Outrage and anger. Corrupt, political manipulation. Unjust and immoral laws. Plans for mass violence and genocide. We see it all the time. Substitute Ahasuerus for Jeffrey Epstein or Harvey Weinstein or Bill Cosby or Deshaun Watson or Vince McMahon or Mark Driscoll or Ravi Zacharias or numerous Roman Catholic priests or Vladimir Putin or Xi Jinping and you begin to get the point. We are utterly broken. Given the right conditions and access to the right amount of wealth and power and we are capable of just about anything.

Thankfully, God is not blind to our condition. He knows our weak and helpless estate. He knows we are conceived in iniquity and born into sin. He knows sin’s power over us. He knows we are enslaved to our basest appetites. This is why He sets apart a people for Himself. He always preserves a remnant in order to save humanity from itself. Esther and Mordecai are just the latest players in the divine drama God has been working out since the beginning of time. They are called “for such a time as this” to serve and protect God’s people from annihilation and to confront the pagan powers of this world. It is not an easy call. It doesn’t come at a convenient time. It will potentially cost Esther her life should she fail to gain the king’s favor. However, Esther knows she is not alone. She knows God is on her side. Though He is never mentioned in the book, the attentive reader sees His presence everywhere like in the days of fasting and prayer Esther calls for as she prepares to go before the king.

Friends, God has not turned His face away from our world. He sees all the pain and suffering. He sees all the injustice and oppression. He sees all the excess and licentiousness. He is deeply aware of the evil that is continually perpetuated by the creatures He made in His own image. This is why He still sets apart a people for Himself. He preserves a faithful remnant He calls the “church” and His purpose is to work through the church to save humanity from itself. We are just the latest players in God’s divine drama of salvation. We walk in the footsteps of faithful people like Esther and Mordecai and all those who have gone before us. We are called for “such a time as this” to serve and protect the lost and most vulnerable and to confront the pagan powers of this world. It is not an easy call. It will never come at a convenient time. It will potentially cost us everything, including our very lives. But we are not alone. God is with us. He will never leave us nor forsake us. Even in those moments when we cannot sense His presence, He is at work to bring about His good and perfect will for our lives and for the world.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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**September 26, 2022**  
**Divine Reversals**

Readings for today: Esther 6-10

At a fundamental level, Esther is a story of divine reversals. God turning things on their heads in order to save His people. Mordechai is lifted up. Haman is brought low. Esther becomes Queen after Vashti is deposed. The Jewish people go from mourning to joy. From defeat to victory. From death to life almost overnight. Purim is inaugurated to commemorate the incredible miracle of God's deliverance and many Jews believe this is the one festival they will continue to celebrate even after Messiah comes.

It is impossible to imagine the emotions behind such a dramatic turn of events. One moment, you are cowering in your home in fear as the mob gathers to bring death and destruction. Local authorities are no help. In fact, they are leading the charge at the king's order. I think of my African-American friends who tell stories about the lynchings they witnessed during the Civil Rights struggle of the 20th century. I think of my South Sudanese friends who live in fear of violent retribution by their own government. I think of my Somali friends who are planting churches under the shadow of Islamic extremism. They know this fear well. It is a constant companion. I think of the women I've met who've suffered abuse, sexual or physical or otherwise. They often feel trapped and alone and afraid. I think of the children I've met who've been violently treated within their own family. I have seen the same fear in their eyes. It is crippling. It is paralyzing. It is dreadful.

But then a new edict is read! A new proclamation is issued! Freedom! Deliverance! Salvation! Think of the joy the Jewish people must have felt, living in the midst of a hostile, pagan empire. They were not helpless! They were not alone! God had raised up a deliverer! A savior! A messiah! In the person of Esther. In the person of Mordechai. God was acting anew to protect His chosen people. Now think of the joy that accompanied the Emancipation Proclamation or the Civil Rights Act in our own time. Think of the joy that accompanied the permanent cease-fire agreement in South Sudan. (The terms of which were unfortunately violated almost immediately..) Think of the joy that comes when entire villages are saved by the gospel and delivered from the influence of Islamic extremism. Think of the joy that comes to a woman when she finally finds the courage to leave her abuser, seek healing and help, and start a new life. Think of the joy that comes to children when they experience love for the first time. These too are Purim.

And what about your life? What about the bondage you have faced or are currently facing? Is it addiction? Is it slavery to sin of some sort? Is it the darkness of depression? The painful affliction of a mental, emotional, or physical illness? Where do you need deliverance today? Where do you need a savior? In what corners of your heart do you still cower in fear? Afraid of what tomorrow may bring? Let Esther's example give you hope! Even at the 11th hour, God is still working to bring salvation!

Readings for tomorrow: Malachi 1-4, Psalm 50

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**September 27, 2022**  
**Hard Questions**

Readings for today: Malachi 1-4, Psalm 50

We love to make God in our own image. We are so prone to project onto Him our own notions of justice and goodness and righteousness and peace. We struggle to understand a God who would confront us, challenge us, discipline us, say “no” to us. Instead, we challenge Him. We question Him. We put Him on trial because of all the suffering and evil we see in the world. Is it any wonder then that the heavens so often seem closed to our prayers? Is it any wonder then that God seems so distant? Is it any wonder that we struggle so much to hear His voice and experience His abiding presence in our lives?

The people of God have always had this problem. We are constantly putting God to the test. Constantly rationalizing our sin. Constantly justifying our rebellious behavior. Listen again to the many different ways the people of God were challenging God in Malachi’s day...

“I have loved you,” says the Lord. But you say, “How have You loved us?” (Mal. 1:2)

“A son honors his father and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests, who despise My name. But you say, “How have we despised Your name?” (Mal. 1:6)

“For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts...But you say, “What weariness this is and you snort at it, says the Lord of hosts.” (Mal 1:11, 13)

“You have wearied the Lord with your words. But you say, “How have we wearied Him?” (Mal. 2:17)

“Return to Me and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, “How shall we return? Will man rob God?” Yet you are robbing Me. But you say, “How have we robbed you?” (Mal. 3:7-8)

“Your words have been hard against Me, says the Lord. But you say, “How have we spoken against You?” (Mal. 3:13)

Over and over again, the people of God challenge God. Accuse God. Defy God. Ignore God. Demand from God. And the wonder of it all is that God never loses patience. Never lashes out in anger. Never walks away from His people. Instead, He loves them. He is patient with them. He continues to work with them and walk with them in faithfulness. Canonically, Malachi is the final book of the Old Testament and the final words from the final book set up the opening act of the New Testament. “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” (Mal. 4:5-6) Fast forward a few hundred years and a man named John the Baptist begins preaching repentance in the wilderness. His self-proclaimed mission is to “prepare the way of the Lord.” He is Elijah reborn, come to make way for the Messiah. Emmanuel. God with us.

God is amazing. He never gives up on us despite all our questions and doubts and fears and failures. He perseveres with us through every trial and temptation. He holds onto us in all our pain and heartache and suffering. He walks with us through the darkest valleys of life. All He asks in return is that we trust Him. Believe Him. Turn to Him. Draw near to Him. Walk with Him. Surrender to Him. He knows what's best. He knows the way. And if we will let Him, He will lead us on paths of righteousness for His names' sake.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 7-10

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September 28, 2022  
Overcoming Cultural Distance

Readings for today: Ezra 7-10

Today's reading definitely presents a challenge. Particularly since we are so far removed from the specific cultural situation Ezra faced as the Israelites returned from exile. It is deeply offensive to our 21st century Western cultural sensibilities to imagine a group of men initiating a mass divorce over race and/or nationality. We rightly wonder what happens to the women and children who are kicked to the curb? Are they left destitute? Is this of the will of God? Was this an example of early Pharisaism rearing its ugly head? Zealousness for the Law of God taken to a logical extreme? Moreover, many wonder if this is yet another example of God's Law remaining culturally bound? Irrelevant to our modern lives? After all, how can we respect a God who commands the breakup of so many families?

This is what makes Bible reading such a challenge. We can't just read the words on the page and accept them at face value. We have to work hard to overcome the cultural distance between ourselves and the text. We have to dive deeper to understand the cultural currents of the day and how this story fits if we want to understand. Furthermore, we have to acknowledge the cultural assumptions we ourselves bring to the text. We are not objective observers. We too have biases and perspectives that are shaped by current cultural movements like #MeToo, feminism, and, at a more fundamental level, the US Bill of Rights. These things will shape how we respond to the text and make it incredibly difficult as we try to walk a mile in Ezra's shoes.

So why was Ezra so upset over the intermarriage of Israel with their pagan neighbors? And why does he call for them to "put aside" the foreign women and their children? And what were the social ramifications of such a drastic move? First and foremost, we need to understand that in Ancient Near East culture, ethnicity, tribal identity, and religion all overlapped. You see something similar in the world today where Islam is so closely identified with an Arabic ethnicity. Tribal kingdoms in the ancient world were defined in a very real sense by the god they worshipped. Each nation had their own god and their own unique religious practices. Their god ruled over a specific territorial boundary which defined the geographic limits of a particular kingdom. Other features that defined tribal and/or national identity had to do with the personality of the king who ruled, the language they spoke, and then, downstream from the rest, the particular physical features of the people themselves. One can see how different this is from modern racial theory forged in the 19th century to support chattel slavery, ethnic purges, and eventually the Holocaust.

From a Biblical standpoint, if one married a pagan, one pledged allegiance in a certain sense to their god. This obviously represents a fundamental break with the First Commandment which is why Ezra reacts so strongly to the news. Furthermore, intermarriage also brought into question one's tribal and/or national identity and allegiance. It was an open question whether one could actually be an Israelite if one married a non-Israelite. One would always be suspect as would one's children. If/when an invasion took place, whose side would you be on? Could you be trusted? All these were real, practical questions for a fragile group of people seeking to reestablish themselves and rebuild their nation. Certainly there were options for non-Israelites to become Israelites. The book of Ruth is a great example and a story the people in Ezra's time would have known well. However, in order to become an Israelite one had to renounce any connection to their former god and their former people. "Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16)

Hopefully, this helps us understand Ezra's dilemma and heartbreak. He is ashamed. He is afraid. He knows his history well and he knows what happens when God's people are unfaithful. "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt. And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today." (Ezra 9:6-7) He tears his robe. He rips his beard. He falls on his face before God and intercedes for the people.

As he prays, a few men come forward with a solution. What if everyone who has taken a foreign wife puts her aside? What if they separated out the foreign women and children as an act of repentance? This seems good to Ezra. The proclamation goes forth. Those found guilty repent. And the story ends. We don't know how it turns out for the women and children. Are they simply cast aside? Left to fend for themselves? Surely not as God's Law is just as clear about how we treat the foreigner and stranger, the orphan and widow, and the most vulnerable in our midst.

So what happened? No one can say with certainty. I can only here offer a modern day analogy. In many places in Africa, it is common for the men to take more than one wife. Polygamy is not God's design for marriage so I've encouraged them to choose one wife and essentially "put away" the others. They remain in the household under the economic care and protection of the man of the house but he lives in covenant faithfulness with only one woman. He provides for them. He takes care of their children. He still fulfills all his responsibilities as a husband and father so they are not left destitute on the streets. It's not a perfect solution but it is one offered in an attempt to bring the family into covenant faithfulness to the gospel.

So what do we takeaway from a passage like this? Well, think about your own life. What does covenant faithfulness look like for you? Where are you living in covenant obedience? Where are you living in disobedience? Is your heart grieved by the brokenness and sin of your life? What do you need to confess before your Heavenly Father today? Where do you need His grace to cover your sin?

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 1-4

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**September 29, 2022**  
**Power of Prayer**

Readings for today: Nehemiah 1-4

What is your first response when facing a crisis? What is your initial instinct when you receive bad news? When life seems to be falling apart, what do you turn to? For many, it is alcohol or drugs. Opioids. Marijuana. Psychedelics. All are readily available in my community. For many, it is sex. Porn. Tinder. Hook-up apps. All pose very real temptations to those who in need of a “fix.” For many, it is work. Longer hours. Longer days. More gratification. More achievement. More success. It can be intoxicating. However, all these behaviors only postpone the inevitable. At some point in time, we have to face our fear. We have to enter the darkness. We have to deal with the heartbreak and pain.

Nehemiah receives the worst news imaginable. He had asked about his people. How many had survived? How many were still living in Jerusalem? What was life like for them? The news was grim. The people were helpless. Vulnerable. Weak. They were barely hanging on. Without a wall to protect them, there was no way they would survive. So how does Nehemiah respond? With prayer and fasting. Weeping and mourning before the Lord for days. Many would argue he’s wasting valuable time. He should use his position of influence to get what he needs to save his people. He should run to the king immediately to let him know what’s happening. Why waste time in prayer? Surely God understands! And can’t Nehemiah pray along the way? Why now? Why wait? When there’s so much work to be done?

We live in a busy world. A world that puts the pedal to the metal 24/7. A world that sets a relentless pace. It is easy to get caught up in the race. It is easy to pull up anchor and let yourself be driven by all the activities and opportunities the world puts in front of us. It’s easy to go from crisis to crisis without ever stopping to ask why? Why am I trying so hard? Why am I running so hard? What am I trying to avoid? Who am I trying to impress? What’s the cost? Prayer forces us to slow down. It forces us to sit in the Lord’s presence and wait for His Word. Prayer silences the cacophony of voices that fill our head every single day. Or at least quiets them for a few moments. Prayer brings us in touch with what is truly real and noble and true and allows us to identify the lies we so often believe. Prayer gives time for wisdom to sink in. For plans to be made. For actions to be mapped out.

Consider again the example of Nehemiah. After praying and fasting for days, he wipes his tears and resumes his post as cupbearer before the king. The king sensed his mood however and asked him what was wrong. Nehemiah clearly had prepared for this moment. When asked, he laid out his concern and his plan. “I said to the king, “Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” Then the king said to me, “What are you requesting?” So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it.” And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), “How long will you be gone, and when will you return?” So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.” And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.” (Nehemiah 2:3-8) Nehemiah left nothing to chance. In prayer, he had sought the wisdom and counsel of God. He waited for days until the Lord revealed His will. He emptied himself through fasting in order that he may receive. And God

was faithful. God gave him a plan to present to the king. Furthermore, because Nehemiah appealed to God first, God gave him favor when it came time to appeal to the king.

Too often prayer is an afterthought. A last resort. Something we do when it's time to "break glass in case of emergency." Too often we look at prayer as a passive exercise. We assume it is a way of avoiding hard work or hard conversations. We don't value prayer as we should. Instead, we are people of action. We want to move and move now! We want to act and act now! We demand instant gratification and instant success and instant feedback. Especially in a social media world. But prayer is vital to the life of a believer. It slows us down. It calms us down. It gives us perspective. All good things in our world today!

What's your prayer life like? Do you make time to pray each day? What do you pray for? Wisdom? Understanding? Insight? Strength? Peace? All these things and more are available to you through our Heavenly Father. All you have to do is ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened.

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 5-7

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**September 30, 2022**  
**Punching Down**

Readings for today: Nehemiah 5-7

I am the oldest of three boys. Growing up, we spent a lot of time together. Most of it good. Most of it fun. We remain close to this day. However, we had our moments. There were times we'd get frustrated with each other. Times we'd fight and get into it. Times we'd get in trouble or get busted for doing things we shouldn't. That's when mom or dad would step in and level consequences. As the oldest I often bore the brunt of the punishment. This bred a certain amount of resentment which I would proceed to take out on my younger brother and he would, in turn, take out his resentment on our youngest brother and he would, in turn, take out his resentment on our dog. ;-) Just kidding. In all seriousness, though, human beings are like that. We have a tendency to punch down. To exploit those who are weaker than us. Take advantage of those who have less power than us. To take out our own anger and bitterness and frustration on those who do not have the ability to retaliate.

Consider what happens in our text today. The people who returned to Jerusalem do not have it easy. They engage in back-breaking work day after day as they try to scrape out an existence in a city that lies in ruins. Due to their lack of a protective wall, they live under constant threat of attack. Despite their return from exile, they are not free. They live and serve at the pleasure of a pagan empire. All of this stress and pressure built resentment and bitterness in people which caused them to turn inward. To focus on controlling what they could control. So those with power - like the nobles and officials - did what they could to line their own pockets. They punched down against their brothers and sisters, exploiting the poor and powerless among them. Fields were mortgaged. Loans were taken out. Economic slavery ensued.

Thankfully, Nehemiah was a godly leader. A man who sought the Lord with all his heart. He did not "punch down" when given the opportunity but instead did all he could to build others up. From the time he was appointed governor in the land of Judah, he refused to take the food allowance. He rejected the oppressive practices of those who had served as governor before him. He persevered in his work on the wall in a valiant attempt to protect the most vulnerable. He acquired no land. He was inclusive as a leader, inviting 150 different officials to feast with him at his own expense. He was generous. He was magnanimous. All because he feared the Lord and wanted to bring honor and glory to His great name.

Nehemiah's example is a powerful one. He shows us in real time what a life looks like that is lived for God. He cares nothing for the riches of this world. He cares nothing for temporal, earthly power. He cares nothing for the benefits and privileges he's been given. He walks with open hands before the Lord. He walks with a pure heart before the Lord. He keeps his eyes fixed on the mission God has called him to and he is blessed as a result. What would that look like in my life? In your life? What would change if we kept our eyes fixed on Jesus and worked for His eternal rewards? What would happen if we held onto all we have loosely and walked with open hands before the Lord? Like Nehemiah, we would become conduits of blessing to our families, friends, co-workers, and community.

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 8-10

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