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December 1, 2022
Rejecting Self-Sufficiency

Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 1-4

For most of my life, my goal was self-sufficiency. I didn't want to have to depend on anyone for anything. When I left home at 18 to go to college, I promised myself I would never go back. Not because my home life was bad but because I felt this desperate need to be on my own. Independent. I've always had this personality streak. My mom tells a famous story about my first day at preschool. She drove me up to the school, unbuckled me, and gave me my backpack. She was hoping for a tender moment where I would hug her and tell her how much I would miss her and how much I needed to stay with her. Sadly, it was not to be. I simply turned around and walked into school. Didn't even look back to wave goodbye. My poor mother! Fast forward about twenty years. My wife and I are dating. There were moments when she really needed me but I had other plans. I refused to change them for her. Didn't even think twice about it. No wonder we were told by an older, wiser couple - both were mental health professionals - that in their professional opinion, we weren't good for each other. I was too independent. Too self-sufficient.

Perhaps that's why the words from the Apostle Paul hit home with me. "Such is the confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." (2 Corinthians 3:4-6) The Apostle Paul was a self-sufficient man. He had spent his entire life progressing ahead of his peers in Pharisaism. He was on track to be one of the major leaders of his sect of Judaism. He had studied at the feet of the greatest teachers. He was born with the privilege of Roman citizenship. He was a polyglot who could speak multiple languages and interact with different cultures. He was a brilliant, passionate, and deeply committed to his faith. But all of it was insufficient to prepare him for his calling as a "minister of the new covenant." Coming face to face with the Risen Christ reminded Paul of his deep inadequacies and insecurities. As faithful as he was to the "letter" of the Law, all he could produce was death. Only by surrendering to the Holy Spirit, could he produce life.

I too spent my entire life growing up trying to chase success. Whatever I put my hand to, I tended to succeed. I was an all-state athlete. Honor student. Eagle Scout. I sang solo's in the church choir and was the lead when we produced a version of Godspell. I was well on my way to self-sufficiency but then I met Jesus. And Jesus revealed my deep inadequacies and insecurities. He showed me that for all my effort to follow all the rules and achieve all the success, all I had produced at the end of the day was dust. Only by surrendering to Him would I ever find the significance I was looking for and longing for in my life. Thankfully, I said "yes" to Jesus that day and He made me a minister of a new covenant so that I might impart life to others. What about you? Are you still striving? Are you still waking up each day trying to win the rat race we call life? Or have you entrusted your life to Jesus? Will you let His Spirit in to give you the abundant life only He can deliver?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Corinthians 5-9

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December 2, 2022
The Hard Work of Reconciliation

Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 5-9

Reconciliation is a radical act in our day and age. We live in such a divided world. We are divided along social lines. Political lines. Racial/ethnic lines. Sexual lines. Economic lines. Educational lines. All of it taking on a religious fervor as each person seeks to defend their position over and against their perceived enemies. Differences of opinion devolve into personal animosity. Policy differences become litmus tests for morality. Ideological purity must be maintained at all costs lest one fall down the slippery slope to compromise. Social media throws gasoline on this dumpster fire on a daily basis. Cable “news” organizations fill their programming slots with partisan opinion shows designed to reinforce confirmation bias. It even filters down to the personal level in our day to day relationships. I cannot begin to count the number of times I’ve had someone tell me about a situation where their feelings were hurt. Rather than follow the gospel-call to forgive and reconcile, they began attacking the other person’s character. Impugning motives. Words like “betrayal” and “wounded” and “abuse” get thrown around far too casually. All in an attempt to justify cutting a person out of their lives.

None of us are immune to these cultural pressures. None of us have clean hands when it comes to this issue. Reconciliation is hard, hard work. And it is impossible without Jesus Christ. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:17-19) The Apostle Paul lived in deeply pluralistic world. A world of great diversity. A world full of political, social, sexual, and religious intrigue. A world where different groups literally came to blows, often in violent and brutal ways. Into this world, Paul believes God has sent His church. His people. And they have been entrusted with a very special task. Reconciliation.

What is reconciliation according to Paul? It is God reconciling the world to Himself. It is God laying down His life for us while we were still sinners. It is God making peace with us while we were still at war with Him. It is God sacrificing Himself for His enemies...namely you and me. Reconciliation requires we do the same. It requires us to relinquish our need for vengeance. It requires us to not count a person’s trespasses against them. It requires a conscious decision not to hold a person’s past actions against them. Most of all, it requires us to “regard no one according to the flesh”, meaning we no longer let a person’s political, social, sexual, or racial/ethnic identity get in the way of a relationship. We love them as Christ loves them. Unconditionally. This doesn’t mean we try to “erase” their uniqueness. This doesn’t mean we try to “whitewash” or “homogenize” everyone. This doesn’t mean we make them become like us. No, we love them as they are. We love them where they are. We love them for who they are. Image-bearers of God. Born with a dignity that, while broken utterly by sin, can never fully be lost.

I can already hear the protests in your heart. What about an abuser? What about the man who murdered my child? Raped my daughter? Stole my life savings in a Ponzi scheme? What about the corporate criminals at places like FTX or dictators who use chemical weapons on their own people? Evil is legion in our world, are you suggesting we meet such evil with reconciliation and love? How naive! Only a white, privileged, cisgender, heterosexual male would ever say such a thing! And perhaps that’s partly true. I am fully aware of my cultural location. Fully aware I have never had to battle systematic oppression. Fully aware I have never suffered abuse. Fully aware I have never been the victim of a

violent crime. But I have sat with many who have. I have listened to their stories. Perpetrators and victims alike. I worked for two years in a maximum security prison. I know many murderers personally. I have seen their hate up close and personal. I have spent the last twenty years in ministry. Spent countless hours counseling with victims of abuse. I have seen their pain up close and personal. I have been overseas many times. Met survivors of genocide. Survivors of civil wars. Survivors of holocausts no one has ever heard of. I have seen life-threatening poverty up close and personal. I have stood at the mass graves. I have listened to the stories of trauma and tragedy. It is heartbreaking on a level I cannot comprehend.

But I have also seen the power of reconciliation. I have seen it in the Gacaca courts of Rwanda where perpetrators of genocide confess their crimes, are confronted by their victims, and the local community is able to move towards healing and restoration. I have seen it in the church plants of Ethiopia where former tribal enemies become brothers and sisters through the saving work of Jesus Christ. I have seen it in New Jersey State Prison where murderers received parole because the family of their victim was willing to forgive and reconcile. I saw it in a local church I served whose history included no record of African-American members though they were located in a neighborhood that was racially diverse. The courage of one young African-American man changed the hearts and minds of so many who had grown up with segregation. His Christ-like love overwhelmed their natural prejudice and they were set free. I have seen it in my counseling office as husbands and wives lay aside their “record of wrongs” and marriages are renewed. I have seen it in my own life as my heart is shaped and formed by the influence of godly mentors from all walks of life. An African refugee pastor who has forgiven those who persecuted and imprisoned him. A female Old Testament professor who has successfully battled misogyny with forgiveness and grace. A gay man who faithfully serves the LGBTQ community though they consider him a traitor for choosing the path of celibacy out of obedience to Christ. These are just a few of my heroes. Just a few of the men and women who are taking God’s message of reconciliation to the world. I pray for the courage to do the same.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Corinthians 10-13

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December 3, 2022
Areas of Influence

Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 10-13

I've recently been struck by Paul's words at the end of 2 Corinthians 10. He says, "But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you. For we are not overextending ourselves, as though we did not reach you. For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ. We do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others. But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged, so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's area of influence." I love Paul's passion and humility. He sees the whole world as his parish and yet recognizes that even he has limits. God is not just using him but a host of others - a great crowd of witnesses - to accomplish His great work. The work of the Kingdom is not driven by celebrity. It is never a one man or one woman show. Paul isn't interested in competing in areas where others have had gospel influence. He isn't interested in extending his brand. He has no desire to promote himself. He simply wants to go to those places where the gospel hasn't been preached and he knows it will take the entire Body of Christ to make that dream a reality.

Sadly, I see the opposite attitude at work in the American church today. Rather than ask ourselves if communities already have a gospel presence, we focus more on our brand. It could be a denominational brand. It could be a non-denominational brand. The rise of the multi-site church is a classic example of this phenomenon. The goal is to build the largest platform possible and it doesn't matter how many smaller churches are cannibalized along the way. We desperately need a reset. We have masked entrepreneurialism as "church planting" and it's literally killing the American church. We plant churches whose leaders have little if any accountability and they are falling in seemingly record numbers. Numerical growth is used to justify all kinds of pastoral abuse and neglect and it must break the heart of God. He must weep as He watches His children compete against each other rather than expand their areas of influence into regions where the gospel has never been heard.

Over the past several years, I've had a front row seat to this mess. I've been approached by large mega-churches asking me to come under their "brand" to reach the front range of Colorado. I've been told by Pentecostal churches that the Lord had anointed them - and their pastor - to bring revival to my church and my community. I've been hit up for money by church planters who are planting in communities that are saturated with gospel-centered churches more times than I can count. Through it all, I keep coming back to Paul's words above, particularly as Eugene Peterson translates them in his Message version of the Bible - "We're not barging in on the rightful work of others, interfering with their ministries, demanding a place in the sun with them. What we're hoping for is that as your lives grow in faith, you'll play a part within our expanding work. And we'll all still be within the limits God sets as we proclaim the Message in countries beyond Corinth. But we have no intention of moving in on what others have done and taking credit for it. "If you want to claim credit, claim it for God." What you say about yourself means nothing in God's work. It's what God says about you that makes the difference." (2 Cor. 10:15-18)

If only the American church could recapture a vision to truly reach the lost. To go to communities where there is no gospel presence. To go to the places of greatest need where the chances of "building a platform" for ourselves don't exist. If only we were gripped by the idea that no one has the right to hear the gospel twice while there remains some who have yet to hear it once. (Oswald Smith) Then we might see revival come. Then we might see the church become the light of the world as she was created and called to be.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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December 5, 2022
The Power of the Gospel

Readings for today: Acts 20:1-3, Romans 1-4

You may have seen the news out of Europe about the Dutch man who tried to change his legal age. Biologically, he is in his sixties but he “feels” like he’s in his forties and his life is diminished because of the discrimination that happens the older one gets. You may have caught the news out of England about the man who believes passionately in “ethical veganism” and wants it to become legally protected as a religion so he can potentially force his former employer to give him his job back as well as change their investment practices so as not to violate his religious beliefs. You may have seen the opinion piece in the New York Times from the transgender woman who argues the medical ethical guideline of “Do no harm” no longer should apply because no doctor should ever have the authority to determine what actually “harms” another person. “I also believe that surgery’s only prerequisite should be a simple demonstration of want. Beyond this, no amount of pain, anticipated or continuing, justifies its withholding.” (Andrea Long Chu, NYT, 11/24/2018) These may seem like isolated cases to you. Outliers we should dismiss. I disagree.

I believe they are the prime examples of God giving us over to the “lusts of our hearts...dishonorable passions...debased minds.” Now please hear me. I am not being mean. I am not being judgmental. I am simply pointing out the reality of what happens when we turn away from God. We dis-integrate. Body, mind, heart, and soul are set in opposition to one another, resulting in skyrocketing rates of depression and suicide ideation. Dysphoria, once considered a mental illness, is now being celebrated and embraced. The Apostle Paul knew the tragic consequences of such thinking. It was celebrated in his own context as well. Human beings, created and designed to bring God glory and honor, turned from their sacred vocation and pursued their own pleasure. They did what was right in their own eyes. They forged their own path only to find it leading them over a cliff. The most heartbreaking part of reading the New York Times story mentioned above was Andrea’s willingness, even desire, to embrace depression and suicide. She admits taking hormones and having surgery will actually take her deeper into depression but she sees no alternative. She has no hope.

This is why Paul’s stirring words in Romans 1:16 are so important! “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Make no mistake, Paul doesn’t believe the gospel is simply a good idea. One philosophy among many. One path among many to get to God. No, he truly believes the gospel provides the only ANSWER to the problem of pain and suffering of this world. He truly believes the gospel provides the only HOPE we can possibly have for a better, richer, more integrated life. He truly believes the gospel alone has the power to save humanity from itself.

Now I know this idea is very unpopular in our culture today. To suggest Christianity is somehow superior in any way to any other religious or philosophical idea is considered arrogant and condescending. Exclusive and intolerant. But let me put it another way. Imagine you develop a successful treatment for cancer. Imagine your success rate is 100% at curing the disease. Sure, there are a lot of other treatments out there. Some more successful than others but yours is guaranteed. Would it not be right to promote it as the better, more superior option? Paul believes the gospel is the power of God for salvation. He believes it actually delivers on what it promises. Is he not right then to promote it as the superior cure to what ails humanity? Namely, sin? Is he not right to promote it above the Torah? Are we not right to promote it above Islam? Hinduism? Buddhism? If we truly believe Jesus is God then how can we not declare Him as superior in every way to Mohammed, Krishna, Buddha, even

Moses? Friends, this is exactly the truth that changed Paul's life on the road outside Damascus. When he realized Jesus had been raised from the dead, he knew He could be no ordinary prophet. Jesus must be God and therefore everything Jesus said or did must be true. And if everything Jesus said or did must be true then we must believe Him. And if we believe Him then we will surrender our lives to Him. And if we surrender our lives to Him then we will submit all our thoughts, feelings, and actions to His Lordship. And if we submit to His Lordship, we will find ourselves a regenerated and re-integrated people living not for ourselves but for the honor and glory of God. This is the power of the gospel.

Readings for tomorrow: Romans 5-8

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December 6, 2022
A Story of Life and Death

Readings for today: Romans 5-8

The fundamental story of the Bible is a story of life and death. It's a story of how death first entered the world. Once upon a time, there was a man named Adam. Adam lived in a garden full of perfection and beauty. He enjoyed perfect communion with His Creator. His job was to care for all His Creator had made. Alongside Adam, there was also a woman. Her name was Eve. Together they labored for who knows how long, living in perfect harmony with God, with each other, and with the world God had made. God had entrusted His world into their hands. Given them all the authority and responsibility for it. They were His image-bearers. His high priests. His representatives. But they soon grew tired of playing this role. They aspired to something more. A role they were not designed for. And when they grasped for that role, they fell. We call that fall "sin." It was the breaking of God's commands. More importantly, it was the betrayal of a relationship. The cost of this betrayal was high. They were exiled from their perfect garden. Their perfect communion with God was broken. The world that had once thrived under the blessing of their careful stewardship now suffered under the tyranny of their selfishness and greed. But still they were responsible. God never revoked their dominion. Instead, He held them accountable. He judged them with righteousness and justice. Death was the punishment for their sin. And so this huge abyss opened up, separating us from God. And this abyss dominated the landscape from Adam to Moses, from Moses to David, from David to the Babylonian Exile, from the Babylonian Exile to the rebuilding of the Temple, from the rebuilding of the Temple to John the Baptist.

Then something miraculous took place. The same God who made Adam from the dust of the earth and breathed His own Spirit into Adam's lungs conceived a child in a virgin's womb through the power of the Holy Spirit. Unlike Adam, Jesus was not born into a perfect world. He was born into a world corrupted and broken and torn apart by violence and suffering and pain. The wages of sin on full display. Death stalking around every corner. And yet Jesus enjoyed perfect communion with His Heavenly Father. In Him was life not death and that life was the light of all humankind. Through His birth, life, death, and resurrection, Jesus brings life into the world and overthrows the reign of death. He bridges the abyss that separated us from God. Death may have had the upper hand for centuries but life - God's life - overwhelms it in the end. And those who place their faith in Jesus Christ receive this incredible gift. The gift of eternal life itself. The gift of a life beyond death. A life that overcomes death. A life that will transcend death.

Here's the bottom line: Just as death entered the world through Adam's sin so life enters the world through Jesus' righteousness. Just as one person chose to elevate himself to a place he didn't belong and so brought the whole world down around him so another person chose to humble Himself to a place He didn't belong and so lifted the whole world up. Just as one man said "No" to God and put humanity herself at risk so another man said "Yes" to God and saved humanity from her sin. And all that is now asked of humanity is faith. Trust. Belief. Hope. God has taken the broken pieces of this world and put them back together again through Jesus Christ,

Readings for tomorrow: Romans 9-12

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December 7, 2022

The Radical Inclusivity of God

Readings for today: Romans 9-12

So many people read these passages from Romans and think about the people God is seemingly excluding. They question the justice of God's election. How could God elect some to glory and not others? How could He treat some people with honor and some with dishonor? How could God love some - like Jacob - and hate others - like Esau? How could God play favorites with humanity? While these questions are real and honest and authentic, they miss the point Paul is trying to make.

First and foremost, we have to hear Paul's heart. "You need to know that I carry with me at all times a huge sorrow. It's an enormous pain deep within me, and I'm never free of it. I'm not exaggerating—Christ and the Holy Spirit are my witnesses. It's the Israelites. . . If there were any way I could be cursed by the Messiah so they could be blessed by him, I'd do it in a minute. They're my family. I grew up with them. They had everything going for them—family, glory, covenants, revelation, worship, promises, to say nothing of being the race that produced the Messiah, the Christ, who is God over everything, always." (Romans 9:1-5 MSG) Paul cannot fathom why so many of his fellow Jews refuse to believe. He cannot understand why they can't see what he sees. How did they miss their Messiah? Their entire way of life was supposed to prepare them for when He appeared and yet when He appeared, they killed Him rather than worshipped Him. And even now, after Jesus has been raised from the dead in power and glory, they still will not accept the good news of the gospel. It cuts him like a knife. He'd rather the Lord curse him if it would help save them.

Second, we need to hear Paul's argument. We need to take his line of thinking seriously. Paul's newfound faith in Jesus Christ is not a departure from his Judaism but rather the fulfillment of it. In true rabbinic style, Paul engages in midrash. Midrash is oral tradition that engages and exegetes the Scriptural text and seeks to apply it within a particular cultural context. Paul is clear. The Word of God has not failed. In fact, the opposite is true. Abraham's family was built on a promise not genetics. It was defined by "Isaac" and not "Ishmael." His descendants become his children by faith and not by the flesh. The same was true for Jacob and Esau, God making it clear His purposes are not random but intentional. Now some may complain this makes God unfair but they don't see the bigger picture of what God is doing. They don't see the grander plan God has in store. They are missing the forest for the trees. God's goal, according to the prophet Hosea, has always been to take nobodies and make them somebodies. To take the unloved and call them beloved. This is why so many Gentiles are coming to faith! Though they didn't seek God, He sought them. Though they didn't know God, He knew them. Though they didn't love God, He loved them. And it's not like God somehow forgot Israel along the way. Not at all! Day after day, Paul says at the end of Romans 10, God opened His arms to His people only to have them reject Him over and over again. Still that didn't stop God!

Paul's final point is perhaps His most important. God is so good and so glorious that He will use even the resistance of His people for His salvific purposes. God will make sure their hardness of heart is temporary. He will use their hardness of heart to open a door to the Gentiles. The goal here is to fill the house of God with all whom He loves. Jew and Gentile. Slave and free. Male and female. All will become one in Christ Jesus and "Israel" will finally be complete. Paul is so blown away by this reality that he breaks out in praise. "Have you ever come on anything quite like this extravagant generosity of God, this deep, deep wisdom? It's way over our heads. We'll never figure it out. Is there anyone around who can explain God? Anyone smart enough to tell him what to do? Anyone who has done him such a huge favor that God has to ask his advice? Everything comes from him; Everything happens through him; Everything ends up in him. Always glory! Always praise!" (Romans 11:33-36 MSG)

Readings for tomorrow: Romans 13-16

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December 8, 2022
A Heavenly Kingdom

Readings for today: Romans 13-16

Imagine you are the Apostle Paul. Writing to a group of Christians living in Rome in the late 50's AD. The Roman Empire has suffered tremendously since the reign of Augustus Caesar. Successor after successor has tried and failed to live up to his legacy. Political opposition is met with violence. The Praetorian Guard (think Secret Service of the first century) assassinates the very emperors they swear to protect. Tax rates rise and fall depending on public opinion polls. The borders of the empire are starting to crumble. The government is unstable and rulers are often certifiably insane. Nero rises to power. The initial signs are good. He seems to care about the poor. He often takes the side of the little guy. It looks like he's being advised well by Seneca. By all accounts, things are looking up. Then he murders his stepbrother. Murders his mother. Murders rival senators who oppose him. He initiates building projects that exhaust the treasury and overtax the populace. Rumors spread about the Great Fire that burned Rome for a week in July of 64 AD. Nero blames the Christians. He starts systematically persecuting them. He imprisons them. He throws them to the lions. He burns them alive in his gardens. It's a rough time.

Now imagine receiving this letter from Paul and reading these words, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed." (Romans 13:1-7) How would you respond? What thoughts would go through your mind if you were living in Rome under Nero watching the country descend into chaos? How would you feel about the "governing authorities" when you see them carrying your friends off to be tortured and executed for their faith? How likely would you be to submit to them? Continue to be a model citizen? Pay your taxes? Honor the emperor? Is Paul serious? Does he not understand who's in power here? Is he ignorant of what's actually happening on the streets of Rome?

Clearly, Paul understands. He will be imprisoned in Rome by 60AD himself, awaiting his eventual torture and execution. He has been flogged. Stoned. Beaten. Left for dead. He has been falsely accused. Falsely imprisoned. He knows what it's like to suffer and yet, throughout his own life, he seemed to model the very words he just wrote to his Roman friends. Jesus did as well. Jesus submitted himself to the governing authorities of this world. Herod. Pilate. The Sanhedrin. All driven by a lust for power. All corrupt to the core. And yet Jesus refused to call down legions of angels to fight at his side. He allowed his false of a trial to stand. He refused to advocate for Himself before Pilate. He ignored Herod when he asked for a sign. Why? Jesus and Paul both understood they belonged to a Kingdom not of this world. They were citizens of a heavenly empire that transcended any earthly one. Their sole allegiance was to the God of the universe who had given all authority in heaven and earth to Jesus so there was no need to fight the power. No need to lead a rebellion. Because at best you would be replacing one sinful system with another.

At the same time, Paul is not advocating apathy. He is not calling for Christians to become doormats for the empire. What he calls for is a very proactive way of living that sets an example before culture and society of humble godliness even in the face of persecution. We are never to surrender the moral high ground. Never to surrender our deeply held Kingdom values. Never to give up Jesus for the sake of political expediency and gain. Why? First and foremost, we recognize all authority comes from God. It serves His purposes. God is able to bend both good and evil intentions to His will. God is able to use even the most corrupt to accomplish His plan. No matter what happens. No matter who gets elected President. No matter who serves in Congress. No matter who gets confirmed to the Supreme Court. All of them serve at God's pleasure. He takes them down just as easily as He raises them up. All of them rule under His sovereign authority and command.

Second, Paul understands the power of a godly witness. Even corrupt rulers cannot deny the power of the gospel. This was the genius behind the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights struggle. He believed by engaging in peaceful, non-violent protest of unjust laws that African-Americans and their allies would hold a mirror up to the corrupt soul of segregation. They believed their godly example would expose the evil legacy of slavery. They believed their political "enemies" needed salvation not destruction and this set them apart. The same was true for Nelson Mandela in South Africa. The same was true for Pope John Paul II when he led the Solidarity movement against communism in Poland. The same was true for Ghandi - though not a Christian, he based his resistance on the example of Christ - in India. In each and every case, these leaders led movements that transformed the course of nations and they were almost entirely based on the "good conduct" of their followers. "Do what is good and you will receive (the ruler's) approval, for he is God's servant for your good." (Romans 13:3) This is the power of a godly witness.

Finally, Paul elevates the cardinal virtue of humility. Submission. Subjection. Offering respect and honor to the office even if the person in the office is corrupt. Paul believes we should model our lives after Jesus. As he will write to his Philippians friends, Jesus is by nature God. But Jesus did not hold onto His equality with God. He relinquished it. He gave it up. He emptied Himself of all His divine rights and riches in order to become a human being. And not just any human being but a servant. A slave. But even then Jesus wasn't content. He took it one step further. Humbling Himself to death. The most humiliating death possible. Death on a cross. Paul sought to pattern his own life after Jesus and he calls all Christians to do the same. "Follow me as I seek to follow Christ." (1 Corinthians 11:1) Just as Christ rendered to Caesar what was Caesar's, Paul now calls on Christians in Rome to pay their taxes. Keep honest financial records. Respect the authorities. Honor the emperor. For in so doing, we honor Christ.

Of all the things we've read this year, this may be the most difficult passage for us to accept. Hate is the political currency of our day. Rage. Anger. Condemnation. Character assassination is our national pastime. We rejoice when our enemies fall. We defend our allies at all costs. We will sacrifice everything - including our Kingdom values - on the altar of political power and gain. Scorched-earth resistance is now the norm when the opposing party is in power and it is crippling our nation. And this is true for both Republicans and Democrats. Sadly, Christians seem no different than their non-Christian neighbors in this respect. In fact, we often seem to be out front leading the way and our blatant hypocrisy is on public display. Jesus weeps, friends. He weeps to see us so easily fall prey to the lust for power, influence, and control. He weeps to see us so easily sacrifice our witness and for so little. He weeps as He watches His people - citizens of the Kingdom of God - so easily and readily give up the moral high ground.

Thankfully, the truth of God remains. Though the grass withers and the flower fades, the Word of God is eternal. He is still on His throne. He still reigns from on high. He still sits at the right hand of the Father. He will bend even this time to His will. He will use even the corrupt politics of our day and age to accomplish His plan. There is nothing any human being can do that will thwart His purposes. So submit to the governing authorities, friends. Live godly lives before them. Witness to them by working for justice and righteousness. Pray without ceasing for the Spirit's work in their hearts. Give them the respect and honor due them by virtue of the office they hold.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 20:4-38, 21:1-23:35

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December 9, 2022

Sent

Readings for today: Acts 20:4-38, 21:1-23:35

What does total surrender to Christ look like? It looks like the Apostle Paul. Paul leaves his home. His friendships. His business. His ministry all behind in order to suffer for Christ. He was compelled by the Holy Spirit to return to Jerusalem where he knew he would be put in chains. Prophecy after prophecy had been made. Warning after warning had been given. There was no more dangerous place for Paul to to and yet he went. Not out of pride or arrogance but out of obedience to His Lord. It was Jesus who sent him to testify in Jerusalem and it would be Jesus who would send him to testify in Rome. From the heart of Judaism to the heart of the empire. Paul was Jesus' chosen instrument to declare the good news of the gospel in front of kings and rulers and authorities. Though it would eventually cost him his life, Paul considered it a privilege to serve.

I have met many "Apostle Paul's" in my life. Men and women who sacrifice everything for the sake of the gospel. They leave their homes. Their families. Their friendships. Their businesses. And they go to faraway places. Towns and villages who have never heard the name of Jesus. They place themselves in danger. They endure persecution. Many of them will bear the scars for the rest of their lives. Some of them even lose their lives. Why do they do it? They feel compelled by the Holy Spirit. Constrained by His will to go to the places He shows them in order to share Christ with those who are lost. They do not act of pride or arrogance. They do not trust in their own resources or strength. They are not naive or ignorant. They go with the understanding that they may not return. But they cannot help themselves. It is Jesus who commands them. It is Jesus who sends them. It is Jesus who calls them into the harvest field. They are Jesus' chosen instruments to make His gospel known among a people who have never heard. They preach in places that do not show up on any map. They cross borders into places where the gospel has never gone. They confront principalities and powers we cannot fathom, armed only with the gospel. And though it costs them their health. Their wealth. Their family. Sometimes their lives. They consider it a privilege and honor to serve.

All of us are called by Jesus. All of us are sent by Jesus. All of us have a field to harvest for our Lord. Sadly, too many of us never show up for work. Our fields are wild and overgrown. They have gone untended for far too many years. Sure, we mean well. We think we'll get to it one day. Once we're financially secure. Once our kids are grown. Once we get married and settle down. Or we work the edges of of the field. Close to the gate. In the places where it's safest. After all, we wouldn't want to place ourselves at risk, right? God wants us to be safe, right? He would never call us to sacrifice our comfort or lifestyle or livelihood or family or friendships for the sake of His mission, right? Isn't the dangerous work reserved for the truly holy? The super Christians? Surely that's not me. Surely that's not what Jesus wants me to do.

The Word of God is clear. It leaves us very little wiggle room. All that we have been given. All that we've earned over the course of our lives. All our success. All our wealth. All our possessions. All our relationships. All our friendships. Everything in our lives must be surrendered and laid at the feet of our Lord. It has come from His hands and must be returned to Him. This is the price of following Jesus. We relinquish it all. We surrender it all. We let go of it all and walk with open hands and open hearts before Him. Our first call is to serve Jesus. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else is allowed to get in the way. Not our families. Not our careers. Not our friendships. Not our possessions. Not our retirement. Not our fears. Not our failures. Not our anxieties. Not our worries. Not our doubts. Not our questions. Nothing. Jesus is Lord. When He calls me, I will answer. Where He sends me, I will go. I am Jesus' chosen instrument to make His will known in my community and to the ends of the earth. And it is a privilege and honor to serve.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 24-26

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December 10, 2022
The Resurrection Changes Everything

Readings for today: Acts 24-26

“It is with respect to the resurrection from the dead that I am on trial before you this day.” (Acts 24:21b)

Everything for Paul hinges on the resurrection. When he met the Risen Christ outside of Damascus, a door opened in his heart that could never be closed. He was transformed. Suddenly all his zeal and passion for the Law was re-focused as he realized everything the prophets foretold had come true in Christ. His hope as a Pharisee for the eventual resurrection of the dead had actually taken place in his lifetime. Jesus was the firstfruits. He was the forerunner. He was the Messiah whom God had sent. And with this knowledge, all the tumblers fall into place. Jesus is the key that makes sense of the Law and Prophets. Jesus is the filter now through which all of Scripture should be read and understood. The Risen Christ brings new life and new meaning to everything Paul had learned over the course of his lifetime. And with this knowledge Paul is transformed from a violent, raging Pharisee intent on destroying Christianity to its foremost evangelist, pastor, and theologian.

Of course, wrapping your life around the resurrection will not make you popular. Paul found himself at odds with the Romans who believed he was nuts. Paul found himself at odds with his former friends and colleagues in Judaism who tried to have him killed. Paul even found himself at odds - as we have already seen - with some of his fellow Christians who could not grasp the depths of his message of unconditional love and grace. Living the resurrection life will certainly make you strange. Weird. Odd. Because your values and priorities and thoughts and attitudes and actions are shaped by another Kingdom. A Kingdom not of this world. Ruled by a King who is not of this world. Submitting your life to Him means living an “other-worldly” life. A life not ruled by fear. A life not centered around self. A life untangled and unencumbered by the cares and worries of this world.

Can you imagine living a life without fear? That’s the life Jesus offers. The resurrection life. Resurrection places us beyond the fears of this world. No longer do we fear death. No longer do we fear danger. No longer do we fear hunger or nakedness or prison or sickness. No longer do we fear the loss of possessions, reputation, position and privilege. No longer do we fear failure or pain or suffering. These “fears” are what the world uses to keep us in line. Squeeze us into its mold. Shape us into its corrupt image. But the resurrection sets us free from all of that! Now we are transformed as our hearts and minds are renewed by the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit that raised Christ Jesus from the dead now lives in us and is at work through us! This is what Paul understood. This is what Peter understood. This is what millions of Christians have understood throughout history and it is why the Kingdom of God continues to move with power on the earth.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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December 12, 2022
Evangelism and Mission

Readings for today: Acts 27-28

A few years ago, a young missionary named John Chau was killed as he tried to reach an unreached people group with the gospel. His death kicked over a hornet's nest of controversy. Some saw him as yet another martyr to the cause of Christ on par with the Jim Elliott's of the past. Others saw him as yet another example of colonial Christianity seeking to impose his views on a tribe who clearly didn't want him on their island. The inhabitants of North Sentinel killed John Chau as he attempted to befriend them, bring them gifts, and, most of all, share Christ. Why the controversy? First and foremost, we live in a culture where evangelism is cast in a negative light. The idea that one person's views are superior in any way to another's is anathema. The Sentinelese had a right to be left alone. Their religious views are no one else's business. Christian missionaries should stay out. Second, we live in a culture where "Christian missions" have too often been used as a cover for Western European colonial expansion. The evidence is legion in Africa, Latin America, and other places around the globe. Western powers using the gospel as a pretext to overthrow governments, manipulate economies, and enslave entire people groups. Third, too many missionaries are naive in their approach. They don't take seriously the potential of introducing life-threatening disease to the local population. They don't take the time to understand the language or learn the culture or use intermediaries who are culturally closer to the unreached group to help make first contact.

By all accounts, John Chau truly made an effort to overcome these barriers and address these concerns. He spent a great deal of time in training. He trained his body. Trained his mind. Trained his spirit to endure the isolation he would experience should he make successful contact. He got the proper immunizations and quarantined himself to protect the Sentinelese from any potential disease. He studied their culture. Studied what was known of their language. He made multiple trips to the region to familiarize himself with the area. He made enough local contacts to provide transport. He clearly was not an agent of some foreign government seeking to extend their influence. Once the dust settled, the picture that emerged was that of an earnest, sincere believer in Christ who clearly felt called to reach one of the most isolated tribes left in the world with the gospel. Time will tell if his death will bear any fruit.

What does this have to do with today's Bible reading? I imagine Paul faced similar challenges in his own journey to Rome. I think about his encounter with the indigenous people on Malta. Having been shipwrecked in a storm, Paul escapes with his life along with the other sailors and soldiers who were aboard. They make their way to the beach where they were greeted with kindness by the locals. A fire was kindled. Food was probably brought. Paul even gets bit by a poisonous snake and survives! Eventually, they are taken to the leader whose father was dying of disease. Paul heals him. Word gets out. The people bring all their sick to Paul to be cured and this gave Paul an opportunity - though the passage doesn't make this explicit - to preach the gospel.

I imagine the same people who criticize John Chau would have criticized Paul as well. The only difference is enough time has past to see the fruits of Paul's labor. His efforts clearly succeeded. The seeds of the gospel he planted bore fruit. An empire was converted. The world was changed. But now Paul's come to the end. The race has been run. The cup emptied. He will be executed in Rome. The latest in a long line of first century martyrs who gave their lives for the cause of Christ.

What can we learn from the example of Paul? Or the modern day example of John Chau? First, we must have a passion to reach the lost at all costs. There is an urgency to our mission because eternity is literally on the line. Christ Himself commanded us to make disciples of all nations. He told us we would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth. This commission has never been revoked so we must be obey. Second, we must be willing to sacrifice comfort, safety, reputation, and resources if we are to accomplish this mission. Evangelism will not make us popular. Many will reject what we have to say. They will criticize us and call us names. They may accuse us of promoting white supremacy, neo-colonialism, etc. But we must fear God more than man. Finally, we have to be wise. We cannot confuse the mission with the methods. We cannot be so wed to a certain way of doing things that we make it more important than the mission itself. We must be culturally sensitive and aware. We must be willing to relinquish power and authority to indigenous leadership. We must be humble in our approach and not pretend we have all the answers. We must study the culture we are trying to reach diligently and honor as much as we can. We must openly acknowledge when we make mistakes and ask for forgiveness.

The 29th chapter of Acts is being written even as we speak...what stories will be told about your mission work?

Readings for tomorrow: Philippians 1-4

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December 13, 2022
Pressing On

Readings for today: Philippians 1-4

“I press on to make (the righteousness that comes by faith) my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” - Phil. 3:12

Years ago, some Mormon missionaries happened to come to my door. They wanted to talk about faith which I happily obliged. I let them know right up front that I was a Christian. I let them know I was headed into ministry. I wanted to make sure I didn't waste their time. They told me they still wanted to talk so we sat down and began to compare notes on the differences between Christianity and Mormonism. We talked about what happens after we die. We talked about the Person of Jesus Christ. We talked about forgiveness of sin. Most of all, we talked about grace. I never will forget how they described it. “Grace”, they said, “is what God gives you after you've done all you can live a good life. It's what closes the gap between us and God after we've made every effort to obey His commands.” “That right there is the difference between our faiths”, I replied. “Grace for the Christian covers it all. We can do nothing to get any closer to God or move any farther away. God's grace is what covers our lives from beginning to end and out of gratitude for God's grace, we seek to obey Him.”

So many Christians today fall into one of two traps. Either they fall into the “works” trap, like my Mormon friends, thinking they can somehow earn their way to God or they fall into the “cheap grace” trap thinking nothing they do matters so why even try. The Apostle Paul shows us the better way. We “press on” towards righteousness, meaning we work as hard as we can to obey Christ and serve Christ and honor Christ with our lives. We take every thought captive to Christ. We run every feeling through the grid of our love for Christ. We evaluate every decision and every action through the lens of Christ. All that we say or do or feel or think must be submitted to His Lordship. At the same time, we acknowledge that the only reason we are able to “press on” is because Christ has already made us His own. Christ has already performed the work of righteousness for us. Christ has already done all that is necessary to fulfill the law of God. Therefore, our “pressing on” is not an attempt to win God's already won favor but an act of gratitude for what He has already done on our behalf. We also recognize to not “press on” is to make a mockery of Christ's sacrifice and we never want to cheapen His grace.

I love how the great Russian novelist and Christian believer, Leo Tolstoy, once described the Christian life. He wrote, “If I know the way home and am walking along it drunkenly, is it any less the right way because I am staggering from side to side?” In my experience, most Christians (including myself) seem to stagger from the side of works to the side of cheap grace and vice versa. Thankfully, it is Christ who keeps us on the road! It is Christ who keeps us on the way! It is Christ who promises to bring us home!

Readings for tomorrow: Philemon 1, Colossians 1-4

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December 14, 2022
Put on Christ

Readings for today: Philemon 1, Colossians 1-4

We got our first winter blast in Colorado yesterday. As I put on my coat to go to work, I thought about this passage from Colossians 3. One of my favorites. “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (Colossians 3:12-17) We do not accidentally become like Jesus. We don’t just stumble into more faithful discipleship. Growing in Christ-likeness is not a product of random chance or a roll of the dice. It’s an intentional effort every day to put on Christ. To put on the same qualities and characteristics that mark Christ. To put on the same attitude that is in Christ. To put on and seek out the mind of Christ.

Jesus isn’t hard to find. He’s actually not hard to follow. He’s not confusing or unclear about His expectations. He even promises to send His Spirit to lead us into all truth, produce good fruit in our lives, and complete the work He’s begun in us. All we have to do is surrender. All we have to do is empty ourselves of “self.” All we have to do is “put off” the old self and embrace the new self, the new identity, Jesus promises to give those He loves. I love how Paul starts with an affirmation. We are God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved...This is the fundamental reality of our existence as believers in Christ. This is how God sees us. Before we say or do or think or feel anything at all, we are already chosen, holy, and beloved. This is the foundation of our identity. As such, we “put on” the qualities and characteristics that mark such people. Compassion. Kindness. Humility. Meekness. Patience. Forgiveness. Grace. Love. Putting on these things every day begins to change us. As we practice these things, we actually become a different kind of people. And as we become a different kind of people, the peace of Christ begins to rule in our hearts. We live from a place of deep gratitude and thankfulness. The Word of Christ dwells in us richly and we are able to encourage others along the way. Finally, whatever we do or say becomes an act of devotion to our Lord and Savior.

It’s a beautiful picture of discipleship. And, again, it doesn’t happen by accident. It’s a long obedience in the same direction. It’s a lifetime of of daily devotion to Jesus. It’s an intentional decision day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year to “put on” Christ. We put on Christ when we don’t feel like it. We put on Christ in the midst of our doubts and fears and anxieties. We put on Christ as we struggle and suffer and experience heartbreak and pain. We put on Christ when we fail and fall short. We put on Christ consistently, constantly, regularly, persistently and He transforms us from the inside out. This is how the Christian life works and thankfully, it rests not on our ability to make it happen but on God who is faithful to use all things - the good, bad and ugly of our lives - for our good.

Readings for tomorrow: Ephesians 1-4

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December 15, 2022
So Many Promises...

Readings for today: Ephesians 1-4

Blessed. Chosen. Predestined in love. Adopted. Redeemed. Forgiven. Heirs of grace. Sealed by the Holy Spirit. Saved to serve as the praise of God's glory. These are just some of the promises listed in the first chapter of the Book of Ephesians. In the Greek, it's one long run-on sentence. Paul essentially tosses all the rules of grammar out the window as he seeks to express the sheer immensity of what God has done. His words literally trip all over themselves as he rushes to explain the riches of God's grace towards us. It's a chapter to read slowly, savoring each word. It's a chapter to read reflectively, thinking through the meaning of each phrase. It's a chapter to marinate in especially if you are struggling with doubts and questions about your faith.

Paul wants his Ephesian friends to know they are the object of God's eternal love. Way back before time began, God hatched a plan to save them. Way back before creation came into being, God was already in love with the creature He made in His own image. He had already purposed us to be the object of His amazing grace. He had already chosen us to be the recipients of His divine favor and blessing. He had already made a decision to adopt us into His own family. It's truly mind-blowing when you stop and think about it.

Not only did God set His heart on us, He came to save us. He sent His only Son to die for us. He poured out His Spirit to seal us for the day of salvation. He is at work inside us bringing to completion the good work He's begun. He's preparing us to live with Him for all eternity. He's getting us ready for the day when the old heavens and old earth pass away and the new heavens and new earth spring into being. When the veil of this world is pulled back and we finally see His glory and the glory of His Kingdom descend out of heaven itself. On that day, we shall receive the reward He has stored up for us. On that day, we shall receive the inheritance He has prepared for us. On that day, all hurts will be healed and all tears will be wiped away and evil will cease to exist.

Christians are called to live in such a way as to give the world a foretaste of that heavenly reality. As Paul says here in Ephesians 1:12, "We who were the first to hope in Christ are to live to the praise of His glory." We are to give the world a glimpse of heaven in the way we live and the way we love and the way we serve.

Readings for tomorrow: Ephesians 5-6, Titus 1-3

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December 16, 2022
Walk in the Light

Readings for today: Ephesians 5-6, Titus 1-3

One of the things I've been asked to do over the years is intervene in churches struggling with conflict. It could be a conflict between the pastor and the board. It could be conflict over how to handle the moral failing of a leader. It could be conflict over vision and values. It could be conflict resulting from years of dysfunctional behavior. Whatever the roots of the conflict may be, the symptoms are almost always the same. Rampant distrust resulting in an inability to listen to each other. Lots of triangulation, gossip, and slander. Half-truths and sometimes outright lies. An overwhelming need to "protect" the organization or the abusive leader through NDA's, gag orders, etc. Clandestine meetings in the parking lot after board meetings formally finish. Hard hearts that are unwilling to forgive and reconcile. A trail of victims whose concerns were ignored or dismissed. And most of it happens in the dark. Most of it is kept out of the light for fear of legal, professional, or personal exposure.

In our reading for today, the Apostle Paul encourages us to "walk as children of light...and take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness." (Eph. 1:8, 11) He tells us that the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true while the fruit of darkness brings one under the judgment of God. He challenges us to seek what is "pleasing to the Lord" rather than compromise our convictions by doing what is expedient to limit our exposure. He reminds us that once we walked in darkness. Once we walked in ignorance. Once we had no inheritance in the Kingdom of God because we were enslaved to sin. But now we are the "light of the Lord." Now we serve as God's representatives in the world and our lives should be a reflection of His light and love and glory.

I know so many who are walking in darkness. They do shameful things in secret that they hide from those they love. They are double-minded, trying to keep a foot in God's world while maintaining a foothold in this world. They want it both ways. I know so many churches who are walking in darkness. They make shameful decisions in secret that they hide from their congregation. They refuse to come clean out of a desire to keep everyone "safe" or maintain the "peace." They are double-minded, paying lip service to God while managing their affairs according to the ways of this world. They want it both ways. I know so many pastors who are walking in darkness. They do shameful things in secret that they hide beneath their public persona. They are double-minded, wanting the blessings of both heaven AND earth. They want it both ways.

God calls us to a narrow way. God calls us to a higher way. God calls us to His way. There is no other path by which we may be saved. We must be imitators of God in all we say and do. We must walk in love and light and reject the works of darkness utterly and completely. We must offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. We must seek each day to discern what is pleasing to the Lord and then do it. This is what it means for us to awake from our slumber and rise from the dead.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Timothy 1-6

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December 17, 2022

Keep the Main Thing, the Main Thing

Readings for today: 1 Timothy 1-6

Imagine you're Timothy. A young man who's been entrusted by Paul with the church in Ephesus. Ephesus is at the zenith of its power and influence. Made capital of the region by Caesar Augustus, it is a center for learning and commerce. It is home to one of the seven ancient wonders of the world. The Temple of Artemis draws thousands of pilgrims from all over the region. They came to worship. They came to trade. They came to make deposits at the Temple which served as the largest bank in the area as well. The cult of Artemis created great wealth. An entire economy had grown up around the worship of their deity. The priestesses exercised great political and social influence. Your mentor Paul started a riot here when he preached the gospel and the church he left behind was facing some significant challenges.

Whenever the gospel penetrates a new region, one of the real dangers that pops up almost immediately is syncretism. The merging of older, pagan religious beliefs with the truth of the Christian faith. Some of it is brought on by the missionaries themselves as they try to translate the gospel into the local language and culture. Some of it is brought by the new believers as they struggle to leave the old ways behind. What often ends up emerging is a faith that is sub-Christian or pseudo-Christian and this is exactly what Paul is warning Timothy about as he begins his letter. "As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith...Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions." (1 Timothy 1:3-4, 6-7)

Why is this so important? First and foremost, eternity is on the line. The primary message of the gospel is "that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..." (1 Timothy 1:15) Nothing should be allowed to get in the way of Jesus and those He came to save. Not the myths of the Ephesians nor the Law of the Jews. Second, what we believe shapes how we live. Throughout this letter, Paul will offer Timothy advice on a variety of subjects. Prayer. Leadership. Spiritual discipline. Teaching. Mentoring. Money. All of these are very practical, down to earth realities in the church Timothy serves. All of these probably caused Timothy a rash of headaches from time to time. Most of the conflict in the church even today revolves around many of these issues. And Timothy is young, as Paul points out. He is green. He probably doesn't have a ton of experience to fall back on as he looks to lead his congregation. So Paul encourages him to fall back on his faith. On his call to be a pastor. One that was confirmed by the council of elders when they laid hands on him. Timothy is not to let himself get bogged down but instead is to pursue "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses." (1 Timothy 6:11-12)

These words are as much for us as they are for Timothy. Unity in the essentials. Liberty in the non-essentials. Charity for all. The reality is it is just as easy for us to get bogged down. We read a letter like this and we focus on non-essential questions like who gets to serve and in what role or what people should wear to worship or the patriarchal/misogynistic nature of 1st century culture. We get so hung up on making sure the finer points of our theology align that we forget the major point Paul is making. "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." (1 Timothy 1:5) Get this part right and the rest has a way of taking care of itself.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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December 19, 2022
Following the Example of Christ

Readings for today: 1 Peter 1-5

“To this you have been called...” What thoughts follow this phrase in your mind? A life of blessing? A life of comfort and relative ease? A life of success and achievement? A strong and intimate marriage? Deep relationships with family and friends? I think these are the things I most naturally gravitate towards when I read a phrase like this from Scripture. It’s why reading verses in context are so critically important.

“To this you have been called...” The Apostle Peter is not talking about a life of blessing and comfort and relative ease. He is not talking about achieving personal and professional success. He is not talking about marriage and family and friendships. He is talking about suffering. He is talking about following the example of Christ who suffered for us. He is talking about walking in His footsteps. Following His narrow way. Intentionally patterning our lives after His life. Jesus committed no sin nor was deceit found in His mouth. Though we are unable to remain sinless, nevertheless we are called to be holy even as He is holy. Jesus was reviled and beaten and persecuted yet refused to return evil for evil. Refused to threaten or take revenge. He simply entrusted Himself into His Father’s hands. If we are serious about our faith, it is highly likely we too will be reviled. Mocked. Attacked. Accused. Depending on where one lives in the world, it is likely one will face persecution and beatings and torture and imprisonment. Maybe even martyrdom and death. In the face of all these things, we are not to repay others in kind. We are not resort to worldly methods to get our way or get back at those who seek our harm. We are not to threaten or coerce or use violence to protect ourselves. We are to entrust our hearts and our lives into God’s hands. Jesus bore our sins on the tree so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness and it is by His wounds alone that we are healed. We place our trust in the gospel. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

Friends, “to this you have been called...” What does this look like in real time in your life? Well, if you are a church planter in areas of the world where the gospel has never been proclaimed, it is likely you will face some of the same suffering our Lord faced. You will be threatened. You will be attacked. You will be beaten. You will potentially put your life on the line. Make sure to remember, God is faithful! He will preserve you and protect you and guide you and go with you! You will never be alone! If you live in the West, in a country like America, it is likely your suffering will be more spiritual than physical but it’s no less real. I am convinced I live in one of the most spiritually dangerous places on the planet. A community where it is far too easy to become complacent. Far too easy to settle into ease and comfort. Far too easy to avoid risk. A country where it is far too easy to compromise. Where far too many Christians think they can achieve godly ends through ungodly means. Where just about anything seems permissible so long as it aligns with our political, social, and/or cultural ideology. We too need to remember God is faithful! He will preserve us and protect us and guide us and go with us if we will simply trust Him! If we hold His hand even in the dark valleys of our lives, we will not need to fear any evil for He is with us! Always. To the end. This is His promise and it is sure and it is why those who place their faith in Him and follow His example will never be put to shame.

Readings for tomorrow: Hebrews 1-4

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December 20, 2022

Incarnation

Readings for today: Hebrews 1-4

It's Christmas. A season where we celebrate something called the "Incarnation." It's a big word but then again we need big words to describe the miracle of God becoming flesh and blood. God taking a human body for His own. God becoming one of us. How does one begin to describe the infinite becoming finite? The invulnerable becoming vulnerable? The all-powerful becoming powerless? How does one begin to wrap one's head and heart around the reasons why the Creator would empty Himself to become one with His creation? Why the Lord of the universe would leave His throne and humble Himself to become a servant? Why the immortal God would subject Himself to mortality and suffering and death? Then again, perhaps that's the point. The Incarnation is not something we can every fully or truly understand which keeps us coming back each year to marvel at what God has done.

The author of Hebrews helps us probe the mystery a bit. These first four chapters give us a deeper glimpse into what it means that Jesus made Himself one of us. Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature and He upholds the universe by His power. (Heb. 1:3) Jesus is the eternally begotten Son of God who is given dominion and authority and power over all God has made. (Heb. 1:5, 8) Jesus is the Creator who was and is and is to come. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. (Heb. 1:10) At the same time, Jesus is also subject to death and was made perfect through suffering. (Heb. 2:9-10) Jesus was made like us in every respect so that He might identify with us and represent us before God as a faithful high priest. (Heb. 2:17) Jesus is tempted in every way just as we are tempted and though He remains without sin, He can sympathize with us in our weaknesses. (Heb. 4:15)

Why is all this important? What difference does all this make? Again, the author of Hebrews clues us in. Because Jesus is both God and Man. Because Jesus has both a fully divine and fully human nature. Because Jesus offers the perfect sacrifice to God on our behalf. We can approach the throne of grace with confidence and receive mercy and help in our time of need. (Heb. 4:16) We have a faithful, eternal high priest constantly interceding for us in the heavens. We who share in Christ are offered Sabbath rest in Christ which means we can let go of our all fears and anxieties and strivings. This is why Jesus came, friends. God looked down on His creation and saw the creatures He had made in His own image living lives of quiet desperation. Hopeless. Helpless. Struggling. Suffering. Hurting. Wounded. And He loved us so much He refused to let us remain in our pitiful state. Not content to send a servant, He sent His Only Son to show us the full measure of His great love and to deliver us from the power of sin and death and the devil. This is why the Incarnation is so important. This is why we celebrate at Christmas.

Readings for tomorrow: Hebrews 5-8

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December 21, 2022
The Best Story

Readings for today: Hebrews 5-8

The gospel is the best story because it is a true story. Anchored on the promise of God. Sealed by the oath of God. Grounded on the fact that God cannot lie no change His mind. Throughout human history, God has made many promises. He promised Noah deliverance. He promised Abraham a child. He promised Moses victory. He promised David a descendant to sit on his throne. In each case, He swears an oath by Himself. He puts His glory and His honor on the line. And in every case He delivers. He fulfills His promise. Even in the face of our doubts and fears, disobedience and sin, God never wavers. He is faithful.

This is why the author of Hebrews says “We have this sure and steadfast anchor of the soul...” He knows God can be trusted. He knows God has made a promise. The promise of a Savior. The promise of a Messiah. The promise of a King to sit on His throne and a High Priest to intercede in the heavens. God not only made this promise but He swore an oath. He put His glory and honor on the line. He will not let it fail. So by these two “unchangeable things” - the oath and character of God - we have assurance. We have hope. We can hold fast to what God has set before us.

The story of Jesus is no fairy tale. It is no myth or legend. It is not fiction or something any human being made up. Jesus was born. Jesus lived. Jesus suffered. Jesus died. Jesus rose again. These are historical events. You can actually go and see where they took place. You can visit Bethlehem where Jesus was born. You can walk around Galilee and see where Jesus ministered for three years. You can go to Golgotha and see where Jesus was crucified. You can touch the slab where His body lay. Not only that but you can read about these events not only in the Bible but in extra-biblical sources as well. No one disputes that they actually happened. This is what makes the gospel so compelling after all these years. It's true! It's real! It happened! And that's why we celebrate at Christmas!

Readings for tomorrow: Hebrews 9-13

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December 22, 2022

Endurance

Readings for today: Hebrews 9-13

“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...” (Hebrews 12:1)

The world is not a friendly place for those who follow Jesus. In some places, the hostility is veiled. It’s an undercurrent. It manifests itself subtly. In such places, Christianity might be perceived as quaint or old-fashioned. Christians themselves are perceived as odd or a little weird. In other places, the hostility is more open. Christianity is perceived as a threat to the wider culture. Christians are accused of being hateful and bigoted. Their way of life is perceived as a clear and present danger to others. Laws are passed to protect the culture from the “threat” of Christianity. Christians are subject to public shame. Some lose their jobs. Some are outcast from their communities. The pressure ratchets up. Finally, there are places where the hostility turns violent. Christianity is perceived not just as wrong or misguided but as evil and heretical. In such places, Christians often suffer tremendous persecution. They are imprisoned. Tortured. Even killed for their faith.

The first Christians faced all these things and more. In those early centuries, there were periods of widespread, intense persecution followed by periods of relative peace. However, even in those peaceful times, Christianity was always perceived as a cultural threat on some level because their way of life was so different. Almost everything they did was baffling to the pagans around them. The way they treated the poor, cared for the sick, or rescued abandoned infants in the countryside seemed strange to those around them. Their moral and sexual ethics definitely placed them at odds with their neighbors. The way they worshipped and gave and held all things in common was confusing in a world of idolatry, greed, and exploitation. And this is why Christians were often targeted. The world simply doesn’t tolerate what it doesn’t understand.

This is why the author of Hebrews focuses so much attention on faithful endurance. He knows their struggles. He faces them himself. He knows their sufferings. He’s probably experienced them as well. He knows life in a hostile world is hard and difficult which is why he continually points them to Jesus as the “author and perfecter of faith.” It’s why he encourages them to “draw near to Christ with a true heart and full assurance of faith.” It’s why he exhorts them to “hold fast the confession of hope without wavering.” It’s why he offers up an entire chapter detailing the lives of the saints who have gone before them who have endured so much. And it’s why he warns them against falling into sin lest they find themselves under God’s judgment.

“But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.” (Hebrews 10:39) Ultimately, the author of Hebrews wants to encourage his brothers and sisters. He wants them to lay aside every weight. Untangle themselves from every sin. Endure with joy every hardship. Lift their drooping hands and strengthen their weak knees. He wants them to straighten their paths. Strive for peace. Love one another. Lay hold of the Kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Friends, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” which means these words are as much for us today as they were for the Christian believers back then. The world around hasn’t changed much since those early days. Here in America, the hostility against Christians only grows. It will take great courage to live out our faith in the years ahead. It will take great endurance to suffer for the sake of Christ. It will take great humility to continue to confront our own sin. But through it all, we have a high priest who is faithful! One who has shed His own blood to open the way to the very throne room of

God. He is more than able to save to the uttermost those who place their trust in Him so keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, friends! He will carry you all the way home!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Timothy 1-4

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December 23, 2022
God-Breathed

Readings for today: 2 Timothy 1-4

There are two things that are “God-breathed” according to the Bible. Scripture itself and human beings. In the beginning, God creates humanity. Male and female made in His image. Fashioned from the dust of the earth, God brings them to life by breathing His spirit into them. They are given the mandate to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and exercise dominion over all He has made.

In a similar fashion, God brings the Scriptures to life. Without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, without God breathing out these very words, the Bible is just another book. Just another ancient text that may or may not have much relevance for our lives. There would be no difference between it and the Koran or the Book of Mormon or any other sacred text. The sentiment expressed by Paul to his protegee, Timothy, in 2 Timothy 3:16 is what sets it apart. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” Paul has been following this guidance in his own correspondence with the churches he’s planted. A careful examination shows hundreds of quotes and allusions to the Old Testament. Paul is a first-rate rabbinical scholar who has been taking the text and applying it to the specific situation each church faces. His brilliance at applying the Scriptures in an authoritative way is what sets his letters apart from that of the other church leaders at the time. Even the Apostle Peter recognizes the unique authority Paul’s been given when he writes, “And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters.” (2 Peter 3:15-16)

Throughout history, Christians have believed God reveals Himself in two “books.” The book of nature whereby God reveals Himself as Creator and the book of Scripture whereby God reveals Himself as Savior. The Holy Spirit is the key that unlocks our understanding not only of the world around us but also of the Word of God. He illumines our hearts and minds. He gives us insight into who God is and what God is about. He speaks to us in ways we can grasp and understand. All so that we will come to a deeper relationship with the One who loves us more than we can ever hope or dream.

If you’ve been tracking with us this year, I am sure you have had moments where God has spoken to you from His Word. Verses that stuck out to you for all sorts of reasons. Perhaps it was a difficult time you were going through. A difficult decision you had to make. A difficult situation you needed to resolve. Maybe it was a Word of affirmation that came just at the right time. A Word of comfort. Perhaps it was a fresh insight or flash of understanding as you learned something new. These are all signs of the Holy Spirit breathing new life in and through the text. And it never gets old. There’s always more to learn.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Peter 1-3, Jude 1

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December 24, 2022
Trail Maintenance

Readings for today: 2 Peter 1-3, Jude 1

I joined the Boy Scouts when I was young. By and large, I loved the experience. Loved to camp. Loved to hike. Loved all the adventures. One thing I didn't love was trail maintenance. Our troop adopted a trail down at Hankins Pass. Twice a year we would go there to perform maintenance on the trail. We would cut down trees. Clear any brush. Pick up any trash that had accumulated. The older boys and men would build water bars. Divert streams if necessary. Repair or replace bridges. It wasn't easy work. But because the trail received regular maintenance, it stayed clear and open and many got to enjoy it.

I often think about that experience when I reflect on the journey of faith. When I first came to Christ, it was like I had arrived at a brand new trail head. I was taking a path I had never trod. I was seeking a way where there had been no way. As I stared at the wilderness that lay before me, I realized I would need to cut a new trail in my life. The old ways simply wouldn't do. The old paths I had taken led only to dead ends. Jesus was calling me to a new way. His way. The only way. Listen to how the Apostle Peter describes it in our reading for today...

“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 1:3-8)

The power to follow Jesus does not come from us. I did not have the strength to cut a new trail. I did not have the wisdom to know where to go. But thankfully, Christ Himself grants us His divine power to lead and guide us into all righteousness. In Him, we have everything we need that pertains to life and godliness. With Him at our side, we can cut a new trail of faith through this life. This will require effort. Peter makes this clear. We must make every effort to supplement the faith we've been given with virtue and knowledge and self-discipline and steadfastness and godliness and brotherly affection and love. These qualities come only as we continue to walk the path Jesus lays out for us. They come as we remain in step with His Spirit and maintain our walk before Christ. We cannot grow lazy lest our path become overgrown. We cannot neglect the ordinary means of grace like prayer and Scripture reading and corporate worship lest the path of faith become hidden to our eyes as the wilderness of sin closes back in.

Spiritual growth requires constant maintenance. It requires constant vigilance. It requires constant attention. You must go back over the path again and again and again to make sure it remains well-trod. This is true in every area of life. Habits form new pathways in our brains. The behaviors we engage in shape us as much as we shape them. The choices we make in life are often pre-determined by the path we find ourselves on. So here's the question for us as we come to the end of 2022 and look to begin a new year...are you on the narrow way that leads to Jesus? What new trails is Christ calling you to cut in the 2023? How are you preparing yourself? What's the first step? As you look back on the challenges

of the last year, what impact has 2022 had on your trail of faith? What maintenance do you need to do? What repairs will you need to make? What parts of your trail remain well-trod? As you walk back over the trail of your life, what parts of the trail remain familiar and comfortable? Every year represents a new beginning. A new opportunity to grow in our faith in Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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December 26, 2022
The Meaning of Christmas

Readings for today: 1 John, 2 John, 3 John

I love the opening to John's first letter. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete." (1 John 1:1-4)

John saw Jesus with His own eyes. Touched Him with his own hands. Heard Him speak with his own ears. He saw the Word of Life manifest itself in the Person of Jesus. He experienced Him. He knew Him. He testifies to Him. He dedicates his entire life to proclaiming Him to the world. Jesus was not a mystery to John. His life, death, and resurrection were real. Tangible. Concrete. His was no blind faith.

John understood why Jesus was sent into the world. John, perhaps more than any other New Testament writer, goes to great lengths to convince those to whom he's writing to believe. To place their faith in Christ. To trust in His saving death. This is what makes John's joy complete. The idea that anyone and everyone who reads his letters would enter into deep, intimate fellowship with the Father through the Son.

Christmas, according to John, is not overly sentimental. It is not so much about the birth of a baby as it is about the mission that baby was sent to complete. Jesus was sent to destroy the works of the devil. (1 John 3:8) Jesus was sent to be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. (1 John 2:2) Jesus was sent to cast out fear by laying down His life in perfect love. (1 John 4:18) So yes, celebrate the birth of the Savior! Worship Christ the newborn King! But never forget what our King was sent to do. He was sent to bring life out of death. Light out of darkness. Love out of hate. In order to do that, He had to suffer and die. Become sin itself and descend into the eternal darkness of hell. He had to become the object of hate and rejection and humiliation. All of this, Jesus did for us. Jesus did out of love for us. Jesus did to save us. This is the true meaning of Christmas!

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 1-5

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December 27, 2022

A New Song

Readings for today: Revelation 1-5

Why do Christians sing? I can't tell you the number of times I've been asked that question over the years. Why is singing such a significant part of Christian worship? Why do Christians from every tribe and nation and people group spend so much time and energy creating new songs? Adding new styles and rhythms to the great hymnal of the saints? Why are Christians so passionate about music? To the point where they even get into fights over it! ;-). After all, especially in the West, we are not a "singing" culture. We don't get together to sing anywhere else in our society. At best we sing in the shower or in the car as we drive to work. We might sing at concerts but that's about it. We don't read music anymore. We don't join choirs anymore. Sure, we enjoy music but as a spectator not a participant. So why then does the church still gather to sing?

In the Book of Revelation, it seems clear that heaven is full of singing. The angels sing. The seven spirits of God sing. The elders sing. All the saints who have gone before us - myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands - join their voices together to give praise to God. They even write new music! Music that captures the heart of the gospel. "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth." (Rev. 5:9) There's just something about music that moves the heart. Far more than words. Far more than sermons. Far more than even personal testimonies. Music taps something deep inside us. When we sing together, we literally become part of something bigger than ourselves. A sense of community develops. We experience the power of the many becoming one.

There's nothing quite like it...at least on earth. But heaven is a place where all the barriers that divide us are torn down. All that separates us is replaced by an intimacy and a unity so deep and so profound that perhaps the only way to appropriately express ourselves will be to sing. Sing the songs of Zion. Sing the songs of Emmanuel. Sing the songs of the gospel. The church is called to "rehearse" this reality. Week after week. Month after month. Year after year. The church is where we learn to sing so we can be ready to join the heavenly choir when our time comes. The church is where we get a foretaste of the reality to come and it's why we spend so much of our time singing. It doesn't matter whether we can hold a tune. It doesn't matter whether we can carry a note. It doesn't matter whether we have rhythm or not. All that matters is that we sing from the heart. All that matters is that we give praise to Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 6-10

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December 28, 2022
How Long?

Readings for today: Revelation 6-10

I often meet Christians who believe the Lord is coming back in their lifetime. They look at the world around us and see the evidence of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. The white horse gallops through places like Ukraine where Russia seeks to conquer her former republic. The red horse rides through places like Somalia and South Sudan and Yemen where terrorist groups disrupt peace with violence. The black horse visits nations afflicted by famine due to natural disasters, locust plagues, climate change, and other calamities. And the pale horse eventually comes for us all, bringing not only famine but disease with him. Of course, these four horses don't just ride in other parts of the globe. They are very present here at home as well. The conflict between political parties and extremist groups is real. The violence in cities like Chicago or on the southern border cannot be ignored. The plight of those living in food deserts in communities all over our country or those who struggle to find sustainable housing is heartbreaking. And the death of those we love due to tragedy, diseases like cancer or COVID, or some other event that robs those we love of life is more common than we want to admit.

This is why we cry out with the saints who have gone before us, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:10) I imagine Christians throughout history and around the globe today join us in that same cry. Can you imagine, for example, what it must have felt like to live in Europe during the Black Plague when 1/3 of the population died? Imagine living in the Holy Land when the Crusaders arrived or in Spain under the Inquisition? Imagine what it must have felt like to live under Stalin's purges or the regimes of Pol Pot or Mao Zedong where millions lost their lives? Imagine what it must have felt like to live in the death camps in Nazi Germany or to be Tutsi in Rwanda during the genocide? I don't share these examples to diminish the very real pain and suffering so many of us face on a daily basis but simply to help us gain some perspective on the delay of the parousia or the Lord's return.

God has a plan. He is never early. He is never late. He arrives precisely on time. He sees all the evil that is taking place on the earth and He will one day come to judge the living and the dead. No crime will go unpunished. No wrong will fail to be made right. No injustice will be allowed to stand. No sin will go unaddressed. Those who bear His seal will be saved and will represent a multitude from every tribe, tongue, and nation on the earth. But until that day comes, life on earth will not be easy. We will experience trial and tribulation. But we can take heart for if we persevere in faith, we will receive a white robe, washed in the blood of Jesus Himself. We will find ourselves standing before the throne of God, serving Him day and night. We will hunger no more neither will we thirst. God will wipe away every tear and take away every sadness and make all things new. Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus! Come quickly!

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 11-13

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December 29, 2022

Symbolism

Readings for today: Revelation 11-13

Today's reading is filled with all kinds of symbolism. Symbolic numbers. Symbolic figures. Fantastic visions of beasts and dragons with multiple horns and heads. It's like an installment of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. The symbolism is notoriously difficult to decipher. Literally thousands of books have been written over the centuries as Christians attempted to make sense of what the Apostle John is trying to communicate here. Some attempt to take John more literally. They believe there will be two witnesses in Jerusalem who will be killed and then resurrected. They believe the beast is a real person as is the second beast called to prophesy on behalf of the first beast. They have spent all kinds of time trying to tie the number 666 to a specific person whether it be Nero, the pope, Hitler, or some future Anti-Christ who will emerge in the future. Others believe John is speaking more metaphorically. They believe he is describing the persecution of the church using language that can pass the Roman censors who would carefully monitor his communications from his prison on Patmos. They use the Old Testament as a cipher of sorts to make sense of what John writes.

Full disclosure, I tend towards the latter view. It makes the most sense to me. John is living in prison. The early church is facing fairly significant and widespread persecution. He's already seen so many of his friends martyred. Indeed, he is the last of the disciples to survive. The churches he references in the first few chapters of this book are clearly under duress. They face all kinds of oppression, persecution, and violence. They are struggling internally with divisions. It's not an easy time to preach the gospel and the future of the Jesus movement looks dicey at best. As a Jew, John has mastered the Old Testament. He knows it backwards and forwards. It was the only "Scripture" he had at the time as there would be no New Testament for about a hundred years. (Collections of what would become the New Testament started circulating in the 2nd century.) So he draws on the imagery of the Old Testament as he writes knowing his Christian friends all had access to it.

If one takes this position, several things become more clear. 1,260 days or 42 months or 3.5 years (all the same by the way because every month numbered 30 days in the ancient world) refer symbolically to the present age of the church. The age between the first and second comings of Christ where she will undergo great persecution as she preaches the gospel to the world. The two olive trees are a reference to Zerubbabel and Joshua from Zechariah 4 and signify faithful witness as do the two lampstands which are a reference back to the churches in Rev. 1:20. John is encouraging his friends to bear witness even to the point of death and trust the Lord to raise them back up again as He has promised. The woman who gives birth to the Messiah is faithful Israel. She who has been pursued by the devil since the Garden. Satan has been given authority to make war on the saints, much like he was given authority to afflict Job, but it will only be for a time. There have been many beasts throughout history who have promoted blasphemy and idolatry. In John's day, it would have been the emperors of Rome who demanded to be worshipped. To take their mark was to betray the faith. To not take their mark was to become subject to all kinds of persecution. Thus the call for the "endurance and faith of the saints." (Rev. 13:10b) The number 666 probably doesn't refer to a particular person but rather the fulfillment of sin. The number six throughout the Book of Revelation refers to God's judgment on sin just as the number seven refers to God's victory over sin. The number six is seen as the number of "incompletion" or "imperfection" and the number seven is seen as the number of "completion" or "perfection." The triple mention of the number six is an adaptation from the Old Testament where the triple mention of anything signified ultimate importance. "Holy, holy, holy" for example. Not only that but when John says "it is the number of a man", he is most likely referring to general humanity. The Greek word is

anthropos and when used without the definite article - as it is in Rev. 13:18 - it most often is a general reference to humankind not a particular person.

I realize that's a lot to take in so what difference does it all make? Here's where it's important not to miss John's major point. Christ wins. Despite the devil's best efforts, he cannot catch up to the woman. He cannot devour the child. He cannot overcome the Lamb. When God blows the seventh trumpet, "The kingdoms of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ and He shall reign forever and ever." (Rev. 11:15) On that great day, all of faithful Israel and all the faithful saints of the church - symbolized by the twenty-four elders - will fall on their faces in worship before the Lord and give thanks to God for "destroying the destroyers of the earth." (Rev. 11:18)

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 14-18

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December 30, 2022
Blaming God

Readings for today: Revelation 14-18

I know a young man who grew up in our church family who has become an atheist. He and I dialogue from time to time about all that is wrong in the world. He simply cannot bring himself to believe in a good and all-powerful God when there is so much evil and suffering and heartache and pain. I have to admit I sympathize with him. I've seen man's inhumanity to man firsthand. I've been to refugee camps and seen victims of attempted genocide. I've spent time with those dying of starvation or drought or famine. I've prayed with good friends who've been attacked and beaten and threatened for their faith. So I can understand where this young man is coming from. At the same time, I've challenged him as well. What if the problem isn't God but us? What if the issue is the person looking back at us in the mirror? After all, my young friend does very little - by his own admission - to alleviate suffering. He does very little to help those in need. He gives no money. He gives no time. He takes no personal responsibility and this, I believe, is the root of our problems.

When God created the heavens and the earth, He created humanity in His own image. He gave us authority and dominion over all He had made. He entrusted His creation into our hands. He set us up as stewards and through our work the earth would flourish and thrive. He also gave us agency and free will. He didn't want a slave, He wanted a partner. He wanted someone who would care about creation as much as He does. Tragically, we rejected our partnership with God and went our own way. We wanted creation for ourselves and what have we done with it? Exploited it. Abused it. Even raped it at times. We see creation as an expendable resource to satisfy our selfishness and greed. The result is pain. Suffering. Heartbreak. Human beings have an insatiable appetite so those who have much seek more and refuse to share with others. The result is a disproportionate allocation of resources. Some have more than they need while others do not have enough to survive. And rather than try to rectify this situation, we tend to double down. Might makes right. The rich get richer while the poor get poorer. It's survival of the fittest on a global scale.

Is it any wonder the Book of Revelation spends so much time talking about God's judgment? God will not be mocked. He will not let injustice and oppression and sin and evil have the last word. There is coming a day when the seven bowls will be poured out on the earth and the key question for us is this...will we repent? Or will we be like those in Revelation 16 who curse God instead? Will we humble ourselves before the Lord and submit to His sovereign will or will we be like the kings of the earth who march on Jerusalem and the Lamb? Will we repent of the many ways we have contributed to the evils of the world and the sufferings of those around us either by our action or non-action or will we continue to blame God as my young friend does? These are the questions God's Word confronts us with today as we finish our Bible reading for the year. They are great to reflect on as we consider the kinds of changes God is calling us to in 2023.

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 19-22

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December 31, 2022
Come, Lord Jesus

Readings for today: [Revelation 19-22](#)

“Come, Lord Jesus!” Echoing Paul’s famous phrase from 1 Corinthians 16:22 - “Maranatha” - John finishes the Revelation with what has become the heartcry of Christians for centuries. Come, Lord Jesus. Come soon. The vision John has received has reached its climax. The new heavens and new earth have come. New Jerusalem has descended out of heaven. God in the midst of her. The gates are open continually for the nations of the earth to receive their blessing. The leaves of the trees that grow beside the river of God are for their healing. God has wiped away every tear. God has done away with every evil. There is no more crying or suffering or pain. God has made good on His promise. The Alpha has issued the final “Omega.” What was once broken is now whole. What was once ruined has now been restored. The incomplete has been brought to completion. It is truly finished. All things are made new.

The delay of the “parousia” or 2nd coming of Jesus has plagued Christians for centuries. Why does Jesus not return? What is He waiting for? Many Christians have believed He was coming back in their lifetimes. As they looked around at the evil and suffering in their world, they could not imagine things getting worse. Many believed they were seeing the four horsemen of Revelation storming all over the earth bringing war, disease, famine, and death. Such has been the lot of humanity since Cain first slew Abel all those years ago. The Apostles were no different. John, Paul, Peter, along with most of the Christians of the first century, believed Jesus was returning in their lifetimes. It colors some of the advice they gave to local churches. Scholars suggest you can even see Paul grappling with this delay, especially in his correspondence with the Corinthians and Thessalonians.

Why hasn’t Jesus returned? Our atheist friends suggest it’s because God doesn’t exist. The “Father” Jesus so faithfully believed in is a myth. Jesus, as good as He was, made a mistake. Others suggest it’s because the work of the church isn’t finished. The Great Commission has yet to come to completion. We haven’t preached the gospel to every tribe, tongue, and nation so everyone hasn’t yet had a chance to hear the good news. Still others believe it’s because the events of Revelation haven’t yet come to pass. The anti-Christ has yet to be revealed and as bad as things may be, they will get much, much worse before the end. To be honest, I have no idea why Jesus hasn’t returned and can only assume it’s because His plans for this world have yet to reach their fulfillment. Time doesn’t pass for God like it does for us. While we are stuck in “chronological” time. Time as it ticks by. God exists in “Kairos” time. Time outside of time. Special time. Anointed time. The appropriate time. And only God knows where we stand according to His eternal clock.

What we can know is that Jesus promised He would come. No less than three separate times, He affirms this to John in the last chapter of Revelation.

"And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book."
(Rev. 22:7)

"Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." (Rev. 22:12-13)

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." (Rev. 22:20)

And what should our response be? To come to Jesus. “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 22:17) Don’t miss this! The movement goes both ways. God comes to us, we come to Him. God returns to us, we return to Him. God draws near to us, we draw near to Him. This is the pattern God has set since the first chapters of Genesis and it repeats itself here at the end of Revelation. This is God’s great desire. It is the primary message He’s been preaching through the entire Bible. It is the Word He longs for us to hear and receive and respond to by faith. So trust Him, friends! Accept His invitation! Believe in His name and receive the salvation He offers you by grace!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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